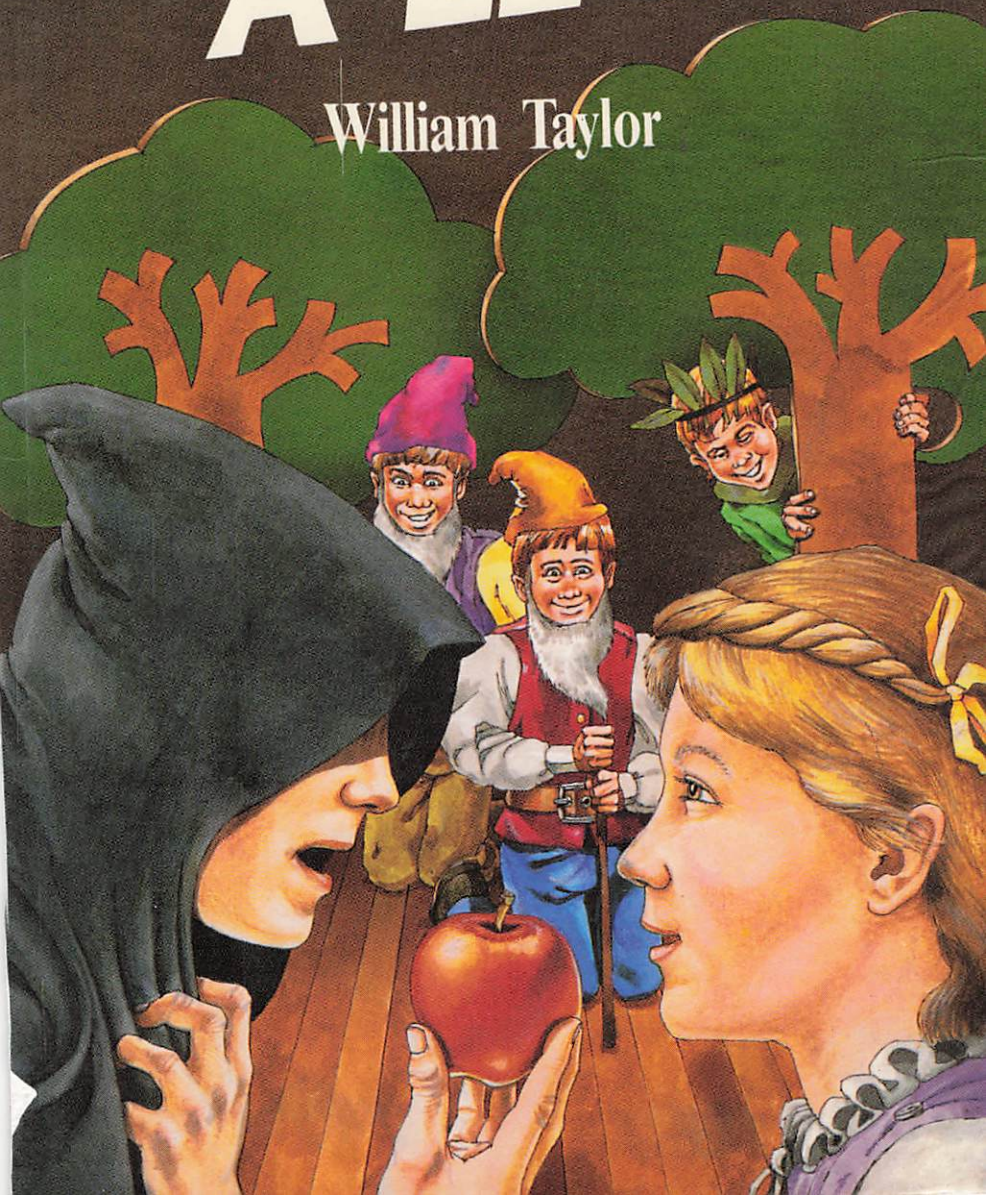


BREAK A LEG!

William Taylor



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DEDICATION

Affectionately dedicated to all those who took part in my drama productions at Trentham and Oxford Crescent Schools, Upper Hutt, Waiwhare School, Hawkes Bay, Feilding Intermediate School, National Park School, Pukerua Bay School and Ohakune School.

W.T.

A Dorothy Butler Book

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CHAPTER ONE

In which we make humble beginnings

'It would seem to me that your Ms Hennessey has bitten off more than she can chew this time,' said Dad. 'Drama, eh? A play?'

'Well,' said Mum. 'She didn't do too badly with their soccer team – and she did say that soccer wasn't her cup of tea. Sounds to me as if your play will be quite a laugh. You go for it dear, as they say.'

'What part have you got?' asked my sister, Sue. 'Maybe this time you'll find the one thing in life you can really do.' Then she added, 'Though, somehow, knowing you I doubt it. Like it sure wasn't marathon running, was it? It sure wasn't protesting against apartheid and it sure wasn't soccer.'

It is of absolute amazement to me that some of us have the character, and can find the inner spirit, to keep on trying. It is surely not too easy when all the support and encouragement you get from your family adds up to just about zilch. The big thumbs down every time. It would make a lesser person crumble at the edges.

'Well, what part *did* you get?' asked Sue.

I drew myself up to my full height. In all truth this isn't very high, but I did my best. I fixed Sue with that steely gaze I keep for her alone and said, 'I am playing a most important character role which is central to the whole of the play.'

'Well, come on,' she said. 'Exactly what role is it? Like I can't imagine that even Sharlene Hennessey'd be mad enough to cast you as Snow White.'

'I am playing The Mirror-on-the-Wall.'

'Uh?' said Sue.

'You heard me,' I said.

Then they all laughed in that cruel way I have come to know

so well. It is my family's way of supporting its youngest member. Are all families like this? Is this what encouragement is all about?

'The Mirror?' said Dad, getting up from his seat.

Sue sprang up and stood between Dad and me with her arms spread wide. 'Don't touch him, Father. Please. I beg you. Please don't hit him. Don't go anywhere near the horrible little brute, either of you. Please.'

'What on earth . . .' began Mum.

'Harm a hair on his horrid little head and we'll all end up with seven years' bad luck. Keep away from him.'

'Ha, ha. Very funny,' I said with great dignity.

'The Mirror, dear. Now what does it do? You tell us,' said Mum, trying a bit of too-late support.

I sighed. Still, better late than not at all. 'While certainly not the leading role, Mother, the Mirror is still a crucial character part, Ms Hennessey says. It will be me who is the conscience and the axle on which the story rests.' I think this is what Ms Hennessey said.

'I thought the story rested on Snow White getting up to a load of no good with a bunch of small men,' said Sue. 'One of which you could have played without even dressing up. Sounds as if your Ms Hennessey's made yet another mistake.' Sue laughed loudly and rudely. 'Either that or she was conning you into the part no one else wanted.'

'What about Lavender, dear? What part did she get?' asked Mum.

'The seven dwarfs,' said Sue. 'She's doing the lot.'

'Be quiet, Sue,' said Mum.

'She's the Wicked Queen,' I told them. 'Like, she's the only one really suited to the part and Ms Hennessey had to agree.'

'Wise woman,' said Dad.

'And there aren't seven dwarfs,' I said to Sue. 'There's going to be nineteen. It's *Snow White and the Nineteen Dwarfs*.'

'Nineteen dwarfs, dear?' asked Mum.

'Yep. Ms Hennessey said it was important that everyone who

wanted a part got a part. She said that no matter what, if we were interested enough to want to be in it then it was her job to make sure we were.'

'Sounds like Sharlene,' murmured Mum.

'You've got me stumped, kid,' said Dad. 'How on earth are you going to get dressed up as a mirror?'

'Oh, I don't know, Dad,' said Sue. 'I can think of plenty of people who'd love to give me a hand to paint him silver and squash him between two panes of glass.'

Life is just one big succession of challenges. This is what I've found, after nearly thirteen years of it. If any one of us wants to end up as a well-rounded person, man or woman, then we have a duty to accept whatever challenges come along the way. It was Lavender herself who said this to me as we were sitting in one of our very favourite sitting places, the steps of the branch library of our green and leafy suburb.

'This play,' she said. 'It's my big chance, Tom-tit. I just feel it in my bones. Deep in my bones.'

This was more than a bit surprising because Lavender Gibson's bones are somewhat heavily padded against feeling anything, I should have thought. All I could feel, sitting there in front of the library, was a sort of chilly wetness in my own bones.

'I can bring to this part such a wealth of experience of life and living!' One of Lavender's dramatically waving arms caught me a stunning blow over the right eye.

'Your experience of living, Lav,' I managed to say, 'is just one hour longer than mine, and because your Mum and my Mum are such close friends, we've shared most of them, and I know I couldn't be a wicked queen.'

She ignored me as she so often does, and leapt to her feet. 'Oh mirror, mirror on the wall, who's the fairest of us all?'

Two little kids on bikes stopped to have a look and listen. 'Not you, Gibson. That's for sure,' one brave one yelled. They both

jumped back on their bikes very quick.

'Stuff off!' yelled Lavender right back, and picked up a clod of earth from the library garden to help them on their way.

Lavender Gibson, my very dear friend. A good friend, indeed, just so long as I agree with her. A creative and well-rounded person if ever there was one. When opportunity knocks at the door it's the Lavender Gibsons of this world who not only open that door but reach out and grab it by the throat. It would take two of me to make one Lavender Gibson. Most certainly a woman of vision for the troubled times in which we live.

For as many years as I can remember it has been Lavender Gibson's great ambition to become a plumber, and I know that with her deep feminist leanings she would bring much to this great trade. She has wanted to be a plumber for so long, now, she can no longer remember why. Still, if one day she brings to plumbing as much as she brings to everything else, the drains and sewers of our green and pleasant land will suffer a great shock. I have a feeling that Lavender would be better off in something they call People Management. I don't quite know what this involves, but I'm sure she would be good at it and I must mention it to her.

'Mirror, mirror on the wall,' she started up again. 'I *know* I'm the fairest of them all.'

This time she connected with one shopping basket and a pile of books being carried out of the library by an old man.

'You damn kids! You go and play your dratted games some other place!' he said, as we helped him pick up his books. 'Like the middle of the railway tracks with a train coming.'

'We are truly sorry, dear sir,' said Lav. 'My friend and I were rehearsing. May we help you carry your books into the library?'

'Like hell you may, girlie,' he said. 'I just took the damn things out. Get your hands off me.'

'Even the elderly, these days, have no manners,' said Lavender bitterly.

It must seem to you that you've tumbled into this off the deep end, and without warning. While you catch your breath, I'll use up a little of mine by painting you into the picture. Let me explain.

I am Tom Colman and I am thirteen. I live with my Mum and my Dad and my repellent older sister, Susan, called Sue. We live in Greenhill, which is a typical suburb and often very boring. Mum is a part-time lawyer who does not deal in your everyday murders, muggings, bashings and armed robberies. She is a sort of commercial lawyer who deals with the uninteresting things in life. I am warning you, readers, do not even attempt to try and flog the copyright of this book or I'll get my Mum onto you. Dad works for the city council. He is a building inspector who checks that houses are not being built by rip-off builders with rotten wood and stuff. Sue is seventeen, a right pain and significantly revolting.

My close friends and I all go to Greenhill Intermediate School, which is not the most enjoyable place of learning, and we can't wait to get out of it. However, grabbing every opportunity that comes our way we manage to make it just about half bearable.

You have met already my dear friend, Lavender Gibson. She is your largish type of woman and I have known her forever on account of her being the younger child of Mum's best friend, Mrs Poppy Gibson. Mrs Poppy Gibson (real name Flo and called that by Mum), is the prop. and owner of the Poppy Gibson Boutique and Accessory Bar Ltd, a trendy wee shop just this side of the mall in our shopping-centre. The elder child of Mrs Poppy Gibson, more's the pity, is Carlos Gibson, close friend and lover of my sister Sue. He looks nothing like Lavender, fortunately for him, as a result of having a different father, a Portuguese gentleman who shot through or died just about the time Carlos first set his evil eyes on this great world of ours. Carlos Gibson is cruel and vicious in the extreme, most particularly to smaller creatures like myself. He thinks very highly of himself because of his enormous good looks and sex appeal. I think he wears make-up. Older-type persons go for him in a big way, as does my sister Sue. Carlos

Gibson gets a load of fun out of using me as a punching bag and football when my nearest and dearest are well out of eye-shot and ear-shot.

Mrs Poppy Gibson is in the process of choosing a new husband, and she's gone for a big one this time. Almost two metres worth. His name is Eugene and he is a North American black of great skill and speed on a basketball court. This is why he is out here in our green and pleasant land, giving us a hand with that great sport and earning a few bucks on the side. Eugene is a native of Pocatello, Idaho, U.S. of A.

Others, too, are to be painted into this rich canvas. Ms Sharlene Hennessey, teacher, firm friend and producer of drama. She is now Mrs Smith, but because that's such a boring sort of name she's decided to stick with what she was born with and use the anonymous Ms for a title. Who can blame her? She got married not long ago to another dear friend, Mr Alf Smith, that shining light of a coach to our team during our brilliant soccer playing days. He's not your ordinary Smith is our friend Alf. A great olden-days star in Rugby League over in that Australian city of Sydney. It was our soccer that brought these two love-birds together, and I know in my bones that Ms Hennessey and Mr Smith are eternally grateful to us.

Others dot this self-same canvas. Kindly old Mr Harvey, Principal of Greenhill Intermediate, a good friend even if somewhat old and dreary.

Let me not bore you too much with outlines of my closer friends. I will be quick. There's Maggie Smith, niece-in-law of Ms Hennessey and very close friend of Griller Spinks, a former star of soccer and now of cricket. You'll be getting more of him later. Like Lavender, there's much more of him to get. Neither should I forget my other good friend, Bogdan Lupescu, a native of Central Europe and a piano player of some ability. Apart from his piano playing, he is somewhat easy to forget.

Enough of this painting. Let's get stuck into how we all faced

up to the great world of Culture and knocked off that great cultural classic of years gone by, *Snow White and the Nineteen Dwarfs*.

CHAPTER TWO

In which our parts get sorted out

Eighty-four persons wanted a part in Ms Hennessey's play, the great cultural event of the year for Greenhill Intermediate School. 'It's a neat little drama with a psychological twist, pets,' said Ms Hennessey.

'Wha?' said Griller Spinks.

'You'll love it. It's a free-ranging adaptation of the old Grimm fairy story, and the basic tale itself is probably even older than that,' she said.

'Can't we do something like what's on telly? Like a real horror?' asked Griller Spinks. 'Like something real bloody and all.'

'There's horror enough in this story to suit all tastes,' said Ms Hennessey. 'Greed, envy, jealousy, lust.'

'What's lust, Ms Hennessey?' asked Lavender.

'Well, there's greed, jealousy and envy, anyway,' said Ms Hennessey.

'Like in *Dallas*?'

'Something like.'

'Gotta be some blood,' said Griller.

'You all know the story of Snow White?' asked Ms Hennessey.

'Sure.'

'Yeah.'

'Kids' stuff.'

'Little kids' stuff.'

'No one's begging you to be in it,' said Ms Hennessey. 'If you don't want to be in it, buzz off right now.'

No one buzzed.

Dear Ms Hennessey. So much more at home here than she'd ever seemed to be in those long-gone soccer days. And, as always, ever one to match what she was doing with how she looked. Gone,

now, were the tracksuits and ski-jackets of yesterday. Today she faced us, flaming red hair flying, in a big bulky skirt down to her ankles, with a little white flower pattern all over it just like the wallpaper in my Mum's bedroom. On top she wore a jersey she had knitted for herself on very big needles in shades of fiery red, with slashes of purple here and there. She looked magnificent. Ms Hennessey has an eye for fashion not unlike my own.

'I have developed the script and treated the storyline somewhat elastically . . .'

'What do you mean, Ms Hennessey? How can a story be elastic?' asked Lavender.

'Listen, Lavender and I'll tell you,' said Ms Hennessey

'She never listens, Ms Hennessey,' said Boggy.

'Do so,' said Lavender.

'The action of the play is continuous. It is all on the stage,' said Ms Hennessey.

'Where else could it be?'

'Lavender Gibson!' Ms Hennessey's eyes shot colours a bit like her hair and her jersey. 'The scenes move around the players. Quite radical for a story like this. I think it should be quite delightful and effective. I'll give you an example. When Snow White is dragged by the palace guards off into the forest, the forest as such enters the stage and consumes her. Get it?'

I did not get it and I don't think anyone else did, either. Did I truly want to be part of a play with a wandering forest?

'How d'you manage that, Ms Hennessey?' asked Bog.

'The forest,' said Ms Hennessey, 'is actually played on the stage by people.'

'I'm not goin' to be no tree for nobody,' said Griller.

'I know, pet. I've other plans for you,' said Ms Hennessey.

'Yeah. But . . .' said Grill.

What an amazing change this year had seen in the life of my now very good friend, Dwayne Griller Spinks! Already a great sporting star and now, so it seemed, due to be a stage hit as well.

Where would it all end? Gone, gone were those days of old, before I saved him, when old Grill had been the top terror of Greenhill Intermediate. The lurker in the loos, forever on the track and trail of the unwary and the small! What horrors the olden-days Grill had inflicted on his victims, hanging those careless enough to be caught by their belts and pants tops from doorknobs, coat hooks and anything else that stuck out from a wall. What a new leaf, indeed, had old Griller Spinks found and turned! He had even given up smoking – for good, he says. There's now only Carlos Gibson from my circle of friends and family who does smoke, and I'm doing nothing at all to help *him* give up.

'She wants you to be Snow White, Grill,' said Lavender.

Whew! Griller might have turned a new leaf, but Lavender Gibson was still the only one who might just get away with this.

'Do it better'n you, eh Gibbo?' said Griller.

'I have just the tiniest feeling starting, pets, that we're not going to get this show off the ground,' said Ms Hennessey. 'And I've not even mentioned auditions yet.'

'What's auditions?' called someone.

'It's tryin' out for the bits in it, dickhead,' said Griller.

'There seems to be hundreds of you here today,' said Ms Hennessey. 'But I do promise you a part, all of you. There are six or seven main roles, or parts, and as many trees and dwarfs as there are people wanting to play them.'

'Do they speak?'

'Trees don't speak, dummo,' said Griller.

'You're right, Dwayne. They don't in this story. But make no mistake about it, they are an important part. Now, I want the names of all of you who want a main part, and another list for trees and dwarfs. Those of you who just want to be part of the excitement of the whole thing, please put your names on that list.'

'When do we practise, Ms Hennessey?'

'Several times a week in school time. Another three or four times a week in your own time. Depends how things go.'

'After school? In our own time?' A couple of howls.

'I am sure I can quite easily do with fewer trees and fewer dwarfs,' said Ms Hennessey and launched herself into a full teacher-type lecture. If it was good enough for her to give up her time. . . . Did we expect everything to be given to us on a plate. . . ? If something was worth spending time on. . . . A few sacrifices might be expected. . . . If you don't want to play the game by my rules, there's the door. . . . As I say, for all she's a friend, she's still your typical teacher, and how often I have discovered that they are all wolves in sheep's clothing!

Ms Hennessey got the numbers down to about sixty after this. Only about fifteen of those wanted a main part.

'Auditions will be held after school tomorrow. I just want to hear all of you read something from that dreadful stage. Want to see how your voices carry, and how you walk and look.'

'What can we read, Ms Hennessey?' asked Bog.

'A shopping-list if you like, Bogdan. Anything, anything at all.' Ms Hennessey gave us all a look that told us she knew she'd landed herself right in it again and should've kept her big mouth shut.

'We've done it twenty times at least, Lav,' I said. 'Not again. Please. Not again.' We were in my bedroom, working really hard on the bit Lav had picked out for us. It's from an antique play called *Romeo and Juliet* by that well-known olden-days writer of plays, W. Shakespeare. Romeo is a boy and Juliet is a girl, and Lavender thought it was quite important we played people of about our own age for the auditions.

Romeo and Juliet have families who are dead set against the two of them getting together and living happily ever after. In the end they die. They do manage a couple of meetings along the way, and we're doing one of these for the audition. In my humble opinion it was a great waste of W. Shakespeare's time, writing this play. The two kids in it get nowhere, nowhere at all.

In our bit Romeo is in an orchard of trees having a wee walk

and probably nicking an apple or two. Juliet pops her head out of a window above the orchard to look at the view. Instead of the view she spots Romeo, and they have a chat. It goes like this:

Tom Colman (as Romeo):

*O! Speak again, bright angel; for thou art
As glorious to this night, being o'er my head,
As is a winged messenger of heaven
Unto the white-upturned wond'ring eyes
Of mortals, that fall back to gaze on him
When he bestrides the lazy-pacing clouds,
And sails upon the bosom of the air.*

Lavender Gibson (as Juliet):

*O Romeo, Romeo! wherefore art thou Romeo?
Deny thy father, and refuse thy name:
Or, if thou wilt not, be but sworn my love,
And I'll no longer be a Capulet.*

*Tom Colman (aside): Shall I hear more, or shall I
Speak at this?*

Lavender Gibson: 'Tis but thy name that is my enemy;

*Though art thyself though, not a Montague.
What's Montague? it is nor hand, nor foot,
Nor arm, nor face, nor any other part
Belonging to a man. O! Be some other name:
What's in a name? that which we call a rose
By any other name would smell as sweet;
So Romeo would, were he not Romeo call'd,
Retain that dear perfection which he owes
Without that title. Romeo, doff thy name;
And for that name, which is no part of thee,
Take all thyself.*

*Tom Colman: I take thee at thy word,
Call me but love, and I'll be new baptiz'd;
Henceforth I never will be Romeo.*

*Lavender Gibson: What man art thou, that, thus bescreen'd in night,
So stumblest on my counsel?*

There's no doubt about it. This must be a winner of an audition. You can't understand a word of it, and that must be good. It starts to seem a bit selfish, me worrying about people pinching my own copyright, and then going out and flogging W. Shakespeare's. Don't worry. Because he's dead he doesn't get any.

Some readers may need a bit of help with the olden-days language. Montague is Romeo's last name like Colman is mine; e.g. Romeo Montague. What's in a name? Tom Montague? Romeo Colman? If, as I am expecting, I make a great success of my stage career I think I shall change my name.

Capulet is Juliet's name. Juliet Capulet. Now, please do not worry about the word 'bosom'. Writers of plays tend to get a bit carried away by the excitement of it all, and probably don't have time to consider their younger audiences. 'Bosom of the air' is quite all right and does not have anything to do with that unmentionable part of Lavender Gibson's anatomy. Mind you, there'd be enough room in Lavender Gibson's bosom for us all to sail off on.

Lavender makes a very fine job of Juliet's bit, because she has a good loud voice and you can hear every word even if you can't understand many of them.

I have decided to have no worries about the other bit, either. The one about other parts belonging to a man. Again it is no more than W. Shakespeare's fine way of putting music into plain words and poetry into a young girl's mouth even if it doesn't quite belong there. Something tells me he was quite old when he wrote this play and was getting a bit confused. Obviously, he had forgotten what it was like to be a young girl.

Lavender tells me that Juliet was only thirteen in the play. She read it somewhere. This does concern me a bit. Lavender is thirteen, too, but there are many around who take her for much older. I have a feeling that she's already a bit old and a bit big for

the part. Still, it's only for our audition and Ms Hennessey may not have heard of Romeo and Juliet, or enough about it to notice.

'Come on. We'll give it another blast,' said Lav. 'Let's get your Mum in to hear us. It'd go better with an audience.'

'His Mum has heard you for the last two hours,' said Mum from the doorway. 'And I think most of the street have, too. The rose by any other name's beginning to stink. Give it a rest and I'll make us all some cocoa. I just hope Sharlene Hennessey knows what she's let herself in for — not to mention the rest of us. She said it a bit grimly, I thought.'

It seemed to take hours getting through all those who turned up to audition for the parts. Ms Hennessey sure put us through the wringer. We all had to stand on the stage, walk across the stage, and even *run* across the stage.

'Reckon she wants to see if we're fit,' said Griller.

We had to stand next to this one, and then that one, as if she was trying us all out for size. I'm surprised she didn't get the scales from the office and weigh us all. A good hour, it was, before any of us got to speak. Most of us didn't care what part we got given, except for Lavender Gibson, Maggie Smith, Cloris Brown and one or two others. It soon became clear that Cloris and Lav were going to fight it right down the line for the part of the Wicked Queen.

'You'll get it, Clo. I just truly know you will,' said Lavender to Cloris in such a sweet way it made my blood curdle. I could smell a real big rat round here. 'To my mind, Clo, you are absolutely perfect for the part. You really *are* the Wicked Queen.'

'You really think so, Lavender? Do you really think so?' Cloris Brown smiled.

'It's made for you, Clo. Even Ms Hennessey reckons. You shoulda heard what she said about it.'

'What did she say?' The fly to the spider.

'None of the rest of us has a hope, Clo. We don't. We haven't got what it takes. Me?' Lav raised her eyebrows and made her eyes

very big. 'I don't care what *I* get, just so long as I'm in the play. The important thing is just being part of the team. Ms Hennessey said so. Me? I don't mind if she makes me a dwarf.'

'I think Ms Hennessey'd have a hard time doing that, Lavender,' said Cloris, very nicely I thought.

'She'd have to change its name to Snow White and the one giant,' said Boggy, almost unwisely.

Lavender put her foot on his and trod down hard, and he yelped out very loud.

'Shut up back there,' Ms Hennessey called out, quite pleasantly. 'Or none of you can expect a part in anything.'

'It's Bogdan Lupescu, Ms Hennessey,' Lavender called back to her. 'He's just being a right little nuisance.'

'It . . . it . . .'

'Shut up. All of you.'

We shut up. In fact, everyone except Lavender, Cloris and me moved closer to the stage in order to hear what Ms Hennessey was saying. This was how I came to hear the following curious conversation between Lav and Cloris Brown.

Clo to Lav, in a whisper: 'I'd really love that part. Really and truly. It's the only one I want and I know I'm right for it, and could do it.'

'I know you could, Clo,' Lav, also whispering. 'And don't you worry, it'll be yours O.K.'

'I wonder what sort of acting and voice she wants for it?' Cloris.

'I know what sort of voice she wants for it,' said Lavender. 'She told me.'

'She told you?'

'She sure did. But she said I wasn't to tell anyone else, she was just using me as a sort of sounding board for her to try out her ideas on. This play means a lot to Ms Hennessey and she needed to talk to someone, and I was just there. But I wasn't to tell anyone because she wants us all to come out all natural. She told me all that.'

The hall suddenly seemed very, very cold even though the sun was still shining brightly in through the high windows.

'Aw, go on. You can tell me,' said Cloris.

'No I can't, Clo. A promise is a promise and I can't break a promise.' Lav, very pure.

'Yes you can,' said Cloris.

'I just can't break a promise,' said Lavender. 'It's not in me,' and she looked very sad.

'I'll give you something,' said Cloris.

'Like what?' asked Lav.

'I'll give you a dollar.'

'Make it two,' said Lav.

'I've only got one now,' said Clo.

'Yeah, well, you can give me the one now and the other one tomorrow. You can give it to Griller. He's my debt collector.' Not for nothing was Lavender the daughter of Mrs Poppy Gibson, well-known businessperson of our suburb. 'I feel real bad about taking the money off you,' said Lav.

I didn't really think she looked too bad about it at all.

'I reckon it'll be worth it, Lav,' said Cloris.

'Well, I know how much getting this part means to you,' said Lavender.

'Give us the buck.'

Money changed hands.

'Come on, Lav. Quick. Tell us,' hissed Cloris. 'It'll be my turn soon.'

'I really shouldn't,' said Lav.

'I paid,' hissed Cloris again.

'It's the one part she's real set on getting just absolutely right. She needs just the right person because the whole play rests on the Wicked Queen more'n it does on Snow White. Get it?'

'Yeah, yeah,' said Cloris, impatiently. 'But you haven't told me anything about what she does want yet.'

Lavender looked Cloris up and down and smiled sweetly and

softly at her. 'She wants the Queen all cold and still and speaking real posh — just as if she's been to speech lessons. Ms Hennessey wants no expression at all and not much movement. She said something to me about a real quiet menace. Now, I don't know what she'd mean by that but I'm sure you will know, Clo. Ms Hennessey says that all the drama in the part — listen, this is the real important bit — is in the *words* she has to say. It's all in the words and not in the actions. Just remember that. Keep the actions and acting all down. She doesn't want big actions and drama.'

A look of great triumph shone in Cloris's eyes. 'I get it,' she hissed again.

'I hope you do, Clo. For your sake I hope you do,' said Lav.

'I know exactly what she wants,' said Cloris. 'I'll bring you the other buck tomorrow.'

'You better, Clo. And don't forget. Pay it straight to Griller Spinks. He's my minder. And don't forget, too, no matter how much Ms Hennessey nags you when you get up on that stage, don't do what she's trying to trick you into, or she'll make you a dwarf. Worse still, she could make you into a tree. She reckons she's looking for real good actors to be trees.'

Cloris Brown read a poem for her audition bit. She read it three times. No matter how much Ms Hennessey nagged at her each time she read it, she still used her little-girl voice, soft, sweet and very posh.

'That's funny, Cloris,' Ms Hennessey shook her head. 'Not at all how I thought you'd come across. Just shows, doesn't it? Never can be sure how people'll perform when they get up on a stage. And you say you want the part of the Queen, pet?'

'Yes, please, Ms Hennessey,' said Clo, sweetly and poshly.

'We'll see, pet.'

'You won't forget my dollar, will you Clo?' whispered Lav as we passed Cloris on her way down from the stage, as we were going up to do Romeo and Juliet.

Tears ran down dear Ms Hennessey's face. 'Do it again! Do it again!' she yelled. Quite clearly we had moved her very deeply. 'Again! Come on. No, wait. I must see if anyone else is still here who might like to see it with me. Mr Harvey may still be around.'

Mr Harvey was around and we did it again for the two of them. He was moved, too. 'Looks as though you're going to have a good show on your hands, Mrs Smith,' he said to Ms Hennessey.

'Well, Lavender Gibson,' said Ms Hennessey. 'I'm sure no one in their right mind would ever cast you as Juliet, but you flung yourself into her part with so much vigour and with such a great booming voice, you'll be just perfect for the Queen. It's all yours, kid.'

'Tough luck, Clo,' said Lav as we all left the hall.

Cloris opened and shut her mouth like a gasping fish that's just been hooked and landed. She said nothing.

'And I told Grill about the dollar, just so's you won't forget.'

There's this other play by W. Shakespeare that Lav and me also had a go at. We couldn't get the words right so we didn't do it. There's an old woman in it who goes around killing a lot of people before she does for herself. I've got a feeling that if Lav is never going to be quite right for Juliet she might be just right for this other woman. A right killer, she was.

We started work on the play next Monday after school. Lav was the Wicked Queen. Ms Hennessey's niece-in-law, Maggie Smith, was Snow White. I guess Ms Hennessey had to give her the part because of the close family connection. I was the Mirror, and Bogdan Lupescu, cough, cough, cough and choke, was the Handsome Prince. As Lavender said to Ms Hennessey, she hoped that stage make-up could do the trick for Bog because he sure had nothing else going for him. Griller Spinks was Guard No. 1, a very evil character indeed. Squeaky Simpson, the smallest kid in the school and in the olden days a favourite hanging victim of Griller, was Guard No. 2. Squeaky just about reaches to Griller's

knees.

Ms Hennessey wanted someone with a real correct and poshly spoken voice for the dead boring part of the Reader who speaks a few times to let the audience know that the scene is changing, and all that sort of connecting stuff. Cloris Brown got the part.

'No one else could do it like you, Cloris,' said Ms Hennessey. 'The part's made for you. I knew it from the minute you opened your mouth on that stage. Regardless of what people might think it is a most important part. All the parts are important, we know that. Funny, though. Until your audition I had really seen you as just the number for the Wicked Queen role. I really thought it was made for you, pet. Shows you never can tell. See you all Monday, pets.'

CHAPTER THREE

In which we consider service to the community

'I don't care *when* Lavender Gibson said she'd meet you. I don't care *where* Lavender Gibson said she'd meet you and above all, my boy, I don't care *what* Lavender Gibson said she'd do to you if you didn't turn up. Regardless of what shocking fate lies in front of you, you're going to do those lawns before you go to meet it. It's going to rain,' said my Dad.

To my mind it's a big pity Ms Hennessey didn't decide to do *Cinderella* for our school play. Put a wig on me and I'd be right for that part. I've trained for it all my life. It seems to me that I've been the slave of this family from that far off time when I first rose to my feet and started to walk.

Sometimes, alone in my room at night, when I'm not dreaming of Lavender – and she does fill the mind quite often – I wonder what life might have been like if I'd been born in more fortunate circumstances. I think, given an absolutely free choice, I'd come back as Carlos Gibson, Lavender's brother. Just think what I could achieve with all the cruelty, great charm and physical appearance of Carlos Gibson! Life would be absolute bliss, particularly if I had been blessed with five or six much younger and much smaller brothers and sisters. Life would be one long summer day. Heaven.

Our lawn is one very large torture for both the lawnmower and for me. It stretches for ever. It's not so much the size that's the worst thing about it, though. My Mum and Dad are just about the best customers of Greenhill Planters and Gifts Ltd, the tree shop in town. Having already bought and planted a jungle they now don't know how to stop. It's not enough for them to have a nice, green, smooth and empty lawn with perhaps a few stretches of decent concrete. Oh, no. They've planted their forest everywhere

and my life is not worth living if I accidentally mow over anything. Even a leaf or two earns me a long lecture. Mowing our lawns takes for ever – truly for ever.

‘It’s getting too much for my poor old heart, Mum,’ I said to her when I finally finished. ‘We had all about it at school, and it’s worse for your heart than smoking. It is. It’s called over-exertion and I think I’m suffering from a dose of the coronaries, too. That’s sort of like a heart attack. You’re going to have to take better care of me, otherwise I’ll be gone. Just like that!’ I snapped my fingers.

‘Yes, dear. I know, dear,’ said Mum. ‘Are you sure it couldn’t just be a dose of the good, old-fashioned laziness?’

Of course that sums it all up. While I love my mother deeply and dearly, no one, ever, could accuse her of being sensitive to my needs. She was busy plonking three more shrubs and trees right in the middle of the only decent, easy-mowing bit on the whole garden. ‘I wouldn’t put them there, Mum. Not there. Not in the full sun. Those trees have got very delicate leaves.’

‘They’ve got no leaves at all just yet,’ said Mum. ‘And the label does say to plant them in full sunlight so that when they’ve grown tall they’ll give good summer shade. That’s what I’m doing. And when did you get so knowledgeable about trees?’

‘Since I had to mow round five thousand of the horrible things,’ I muttered. Even I must admit that trees are really very beautiful things in their own way. They’re fine just so long as they’re kept in their right place, such as in parks, along streets and in the gardens of other people.

‘Don’t tell me your problems,’ said Lavender when I finally met up with her. ‘I’ve got enough of my own. Poppy’s taken off for the weekend.’ Lavender, being very modern and up-to-date, calls her mother by her first name. Except she never seems to actually do it in front of her mother. ‘She’s gone off with Eugene for a couple of days before he jets off back for a short vacation in the U.S. of A. Now Carlos reckons he’s going to have a party, and

I said over my dead body and he said he'd be only too happy to arrange that. He would, too. Don't tell me your problems.'

'We could go to his party,' I said, hopefully.

'He's not having one and that's that,' said Lav.

'When's your mother going?'

'She's gone.'

'Where's she gone?'

'Skiing. At her age! I ask you. You'd think she was going on a trip to the South Pole, judging by all the junk she's taken.'

'I didn't know she skied,' I said.

'She doesn't. Quite likely she'll break her neck, and it'll serve her right. Get to Poppy's age and your bones snap like match sticks, and take years to mend. I just wish she'd begin to act her age,' said Lav, bitterly.

'Yeah,' I said, sympathetically. Mrs Poppy Gibson had recently had her thirty-fifth birthday. My Dad reckoned it was the third or fourth thirty-fifth birthday she'd celebrated.

'If she'd taken Carlos with them, just think we could have had the weekend to ourselves working on the play,' said Lav.

I could think of other things we could have done if we'd been given a weekend to ourselves. I didn't mention them. 'Does Eugene ski? I never knew.'

'Eugene does everything,' said Lav, clearly intending not to get into a good mood. 'Poppy's done him up all in white. I suppose I've got to say he looked quite good.'

'I bet,' I said. If I'm given another life I wouldn't mind coming back as Eugene, too. As Mrs Poppy Gibson says, and she should know, Eugene is one great hunk of a person. Mind you, just how he'd manage slithering down the slippery slopes of a snowfield all dressed in white was another thing. Could sure scare the stuffing out of all the other skiers just seeing a black face, two metres off the ground, racing down towards them. Sort of the opposite of a ghost. 'I think I wouldn't mind skiing,' I said.

'Yeah, well, Poppy says she might take us all up before the end

of the season. Johnsons Potato Crisps own a little ski hut up there, and Eugene can use it any time he wants.'

Johnsons Potato Crisps are Eugene's employers. He is the big star player in the Johnsons Potato Crisps Suburbs United National League team. 'Yeah, I reckon it'd be great. Make the ski scene, as they say.'

'You can go if you want. Me? I think a weekend absolutely to myself would be wonderful. I'd use it for personal growth and development.'

I most certainly was not going to tell her that I thought she had already grown and developed quite enough. I'm not that big a fool. 'Come on, Lav. Cheer up. You're not dying of an incurable disease and there's others worse off than you.'

'Excuse me for using oxygen,' said Lavender.

Maggie, Griller and Bog joined us on the steps of the branch library and even Lavender cheered up when Grill shared round a very big bag of doughnuts.

'I'm weally, weally at my wits' end,' said Maggie. She always spoke this way. I think it was something to do with her having blonde hair.

'What's wrong with you, Mags?' Lavender cheered a bit more.

'It's this thing of old Harvey's,' said Maggie.

'Has old Harvey got a thing, eh Maggie?' said Griller.

'Gwiller, you're the pits,' said Maggie. 'And you mustn't speak about Mr Harvey that way. He's a nice old thing, weally. Anyway, Gwiller, I told you all about it biking down here. You never listen to what I say. Too busy eating, that's your twouble, Gwiller.'

Maggie was quite right. Griller might have been cured of a lot of things when he turned his new leaf, but eating wasn't one of them. Put very simply, Griller Spinks just liked eating truly great amounts of food, as often as possible.

'I just don't know what to do to make my community better,' said Maggie. 'Far as I can see it's good enough alweady.'

'That's stretching it a bit,' said Lavender. 'Good enough for what?'

Dear old Mr Harvey had made his big announcement at our last assembly. 'Ask not what your community can do for you, but rather what you can do for your community.' Very choice words Mr Harvey uses, once he gets going. 'We must not be a community of takers. Rather we must strive to become a community of thinkers, contributors and givers.'

Then he'd really let rip. 'I see the sad signs around me of an uncaring and selfish community. The litter that's littered, the graffiti that's scrawled.' I could swear he looked in the exact direction of Lav and me on this one. No one ever missed an opportunity to rub in just how wrong had gone our anti-apartheid spray-bomb campaign.

'It is my intention to establish a yearly award system in this school, our school, for service to the wider community. While none of you is forced to enter, it is my expectation that all of you will. The rewards,' he thundered out as he really built up a good head of steam, 'will be significant, and all of you who enter can expect a certificate of service, presented by myself. These will be given out after I have received a written report from the participants about their projects, in which they explain how their effort has helped our wider community. It is not enough,' he went on in that amazing way teachers have with trapped audiences, 'for us to always have our hands extended to the community, for their help and assistance. We must give something in return. You can do it by yourselves, or you can do it in a group.'

Kindly old Mr Harvey. A man of faith and vision. The only thing he didn't give us was the time in which to actually do this community service. Somehow or other we were expected to achieve these miracles in our own very short and sweet free time. It crossed my mind that I just might ask dear old Mr Harvey if mowing our own lawns could be considered a community service. After all, if I didn't do ours no one else would and they would then surely be a right blot on the landscape of our green and leafy suburb. One big eye-sore.

'I'm weally at my wits' end,' said Maggie. 'And with Ms Hennessey, Auntie Sharlene I mean, living at the bottom of our garden, I haven't got a hope of getting away with doing nothing. It's enough to give me winkles.'

Ms Hennessey (Mrs Smith) didn't quite live at the bottom of Maggie's garden. She and Mr Alf Smith, her husband, lived in the Smith granny flat in which, long, long ago, a Smith granny had lived. I just wish a Colman granny lived in a granny flat in our garden. Just think of how much less lawn there'd be.

'We got a couple of months, Maggie,' said Bog. 'I wouldn't let it get you down. I reckon we should get into something all together. You know – as a team. Much easier, eh?'

'Dunno,' said Griller. 'Cos I already know what I'm gonna do.'

This person, this Griller, never ceases to amaze me. Absolutely amaze me. A lifetime of real evil, and then just the one leaf turned over. And now, Griller Spinks, community servant!

'What are you going to do, Grill?' asked Lav.

'Dogs,' said Griller.

'Dogs?' asked Boggy. 'What are you going to do to them?'

'Take 'em for walks.'

One of the great hidden undersides of Griller Spinks was his big love of animals. Now, Griller Spinks looks just the sort to eat new-born kittens on toast for breakfast. But, no. All furry and feathery creatures were closer to the heart of Grill than almost any human. Indeed your everyday human could be forgiven for thinking that Griller Spinks had no heart at all. 'Where you gonna get them from?' I asked.

Sighing, jamming the last doughnut, whole, into his mouth, Griller explained very patiently, as if to an audience of babies. 'Yer old people all got pets, eh?'

'Yeah.'

'Well . . . ug . . . er, er . . . gurg,' down went the last hunk and he licked his lips and his chin with a tongue half as long as my arm. What a real, choice sight! 'They got pets, eh?'

'Yeah.'

'Cos like they got no one else, eh? They're all alone,' Griller looked about to cry. 'All alone and no one there but their dog, eh?'

'Or their cat,' said Maggie.

'Or their guinea pig,' said Bog.

'Shut up or I'll do yer,' said Grill. 'Yer old people don't have guinea pigs. Nah, they're all alone all right.'

'The dogs?' asked Boggy.

'Yeah. Summa them too, eh?' said Grill. 'Nah, the people. The old people. Can't take them dogs of theirs for walks. Not for real walks, because they go too slow. You ever see any real old people runnin' with their dogs, eh? Nah. Well, I'm gonna get them, and do it.'

Time for a real good shudder. Griller is still able, leaves turning and all, to make me shudder. Picture, if you will, Griller Spinks on the doorstep of a little old lady with a little wee white dog called Fifi. Now, for all that we understand about Griller and the turned leaf, I ask you, does the little old lady know? Does Fifi know?

We all know just how good a goalkeeper Grill is – simply because he fills the goal to overflowing – but is this enough? Your average little old lady opening her cottage door and seeing just the tiny bit of Griller that fills it – is she, I ask, going to hand over her precious pet as he says, 'I come fer yer dog, lady'?

Don't know, really. If I were a little old lady, perhaps I would. After all, what would be the alternative?

'I'm gonna make this list, eh? A list of dogs and old people. Then I'm gonna tell 'em I'm gonna help 'em. I reckon that's a community thing like old Harvey said, eh?'

'Gwills, you're a weal angel,' said Maggie. 'A weal heart of gold, and I'm going to tell Mr Harvey.'

'Tell him what?' asked Griller.

I must follow Griller on his first round of visits to the elderly. I truly must. I think the little old ladies might feel like I do after

mowing our lawns: in great need of heart massage and resuscitation.

'If I can't think of what to do I'll help you, Gwiller,' said Maggie. 'What are you doing, Lav?'

'I have my plans,' said Lavender, mysteriously. 'I certainly have my plans.'

Time for another shudder. When Lavender Gibson makes plans for our community it is no less a time to shudder than when Griller Spinks does the same.

'Couldn't you and me and Lavender just pick up rubbish and glass and stuff,' said Boggy to me. 'That'd be a good service.'

'Not on your life,' said Lav. 'You can all do that if you want. Me? I've got much better plans to fry.'

'You're not going to bweak the law, Lav,' said Maggie, looking worried. 'Not again.'

'How on earth can you break the law, Mags, if you're doing a community service?' asked Lavender. 'Tell me that.'

'I don't know,' said Maggie, miserably. 'But I weckon you could, quite easy.'

'Anyway, it's not our main job and worry this term. The play's the name of the game.'

'What game, Lav?' asked Griller.

'Come on. We'll all go to my place. Five of us should be able to scare the pants off Carlos. If they're not off him already.'

'Lavender Gibson, weally,' said Maggie. 'Carlos is dweamy. Weal dweamy. I don't know why you hate him so.'

'You don't have to live with him,' said Lav.

'I just wish I did,' said Maggie. 'Carlos is the most gorgeous man I know.'

'Hey, wha . . . ?' said Griller.

'Except for you, Teddy Bear,' said Maggie. 'Don't cwy.'

Teddy Bear? TEDDY BEAR??!! Still, maybe grizzly bear could sum him up.

'I'll make us all pancakes,' said Lavender. 'Come on.'

We did not need a second invitation. Lavender Gibson is just

about the world's best maker of pancakes. 'What are you really going to do for your community thing, Lav?' I asked, as we biked off.

'Never you mind, Tom-tit. Never you mind,' she said. 'You pick up your litter and I'll pick up mine.'

CHAPTER FOUR

In which we get right down to work

Those of us with experience in the wide world of the performing arts know that sacrifice is the name of the game. Not only is it blood, sweat and tears but it's raw guts as well. I'm not yet entirely sure what it is we sacrifice, but I'm sure it's something. But those of you who have trod the boards, as I myself have done, will know that the true reward is not some pot of gold at the end of some crummy rainbow. No, it is bringing joy to the hearts, and laughter and tears to the eyes of ordinary people. Mind you, I wouldn't exactly say no to a truly great fortune and a heap of fame.

'Make the most of the experience,' said our dear Ms Hennessey in that typical down-to-earth way of hers. 'It may seem nothing more to you than a cold and dirty school hall, but the thoughts and feelings, hopes and fears you will have in this place over the next few weeks will be no different from those of the stars of a play in the West End of London, or Broadway in New York.'

'Or on the great silver screen, Ms Hennessey?' Lavender called out.

'As you say, Lavender,' said Ms Hennessey. 'And now, pets, it's A into G time. Let's get this show on the road!'

Cloris Brown (as the Reader):

In the long, long ago and in a land far away, dwelt a wicked queen. With her, lived her beautiful step-daughter, Snow White. Now it came to pass that the queen, being of a jealous disposition as well as being fantastically beautiful, saw in her step-daughter a beauty likely to rival her own. This did not please her. In the way of things as once they were, the queen owned a mirror that not only reflected a truthful visage of whoever looked in it, but commented on their relative beauties. One day, in the boudoir of the queen. . . .

Lavender Gibson (as the Wicked Queen):

(At her dressing-table. Mime.) Paint the face, lacquer the hair, with

a beauty like mine I have nothing to fear. My mirror tells me what I already know. My beauty's a legend beyond compare. Mirror! Mirror!

(Mirror enters.)

*Reflect my beauty for all to see,
My rivals can squirm in jealousy.
Mirror, mirror on the wall*

Who is the fairest of them all?

Tom Colman (as the Mirror): Not you, my dear.

Lavender Gibson: (Enraged. Paces the stage furiously.)

What's this you say? What trick do you play?

Tell me again – who is the fairest in the land?

Tom Colman: Your vanity is insanity. What on earth do you expect at your age? You're lucky it's lasted so long. You're growing old.

Old! D'you hear me? Old. Old. Old. Very old.

Lavender Gibson: Old? Old? You crazed and glazed character. I'm not growing old. Me? Why, I'm growing lovelier.

*Tom Colman: Fool yourself, but you don't fool me,
Hide yourself from reality.*

I wouldn't mind taking a little bet

That all you see is all you get!

Another is living around these parts

Whose name should ring a tinkle

In your mind, if not your heart,

And she ain't got no wrinkles.

Lavender Gibson: Answer me, you square of glass,

Tell me in truth, who does surpass my beauty?

Oh, Mirror on the wall. Who, who, is the fairest of them all?

Tom Colman: The Princess Snow White.

Lavender Gibson: Snow who? Who's she?

Tom Colman: Your step-daughter, ma'am. A lovelier, more luscious little dish'd be very hard to find.

Lavender Gibson (To the two lounging guards who have just come in): Guards! Guards! Bring her forth. Bring her forth.

'I wonder, Ms Hennessey,' Lavender called from the stage, 'if we might just change one or two aspects of this part?'

'Such as, pet?' said Ms Hennessey.

'First, I do think it would add to it if I really got wilder with the Mirror. You know, really belted him up. I think the Wicked Queen would, don't you?'

Oh, how I shivered. 'I don't think she would, Ms Hennessey. I don't think she would. She wouldn't,' I said.

Lavender continued. 'I really do think, Ms Hennessey, that we've got to look deeper into the hidden meanings of this play, like what they do on telly.'

'I haven't noticed too many hidden meanings on telly, pet,' said Ms Hennessey.

'I have this idea, Ms Hennessey,' said Lav. 'That the Wicked Queen is only the less beautiful of the two women in the cracked mind of the Mirror, not in reality.'

'Let's do it my way, pet,' said Ms Hennessey. 'Took me weeks to write the damn thing, and I know what I want. Down near the bottom of the first page you get to have a go at the Mirror.'

'It's just I think my part could be added to a bit. It would make it all very much better.' Lavender wasn't going to give up.

'Aw, come on, Gibbo. Let's get on with it. It's my bit next,' said Griller.

'Yeah, and that's another thing, Ms Hennessey,' said Lavender.

'Lavender!' Ms Hennessey yelled. 'Who is directing this play? You or me?'

'She is, Ms Hennessey,' said Cloris Brown. 'Lav Gibson's gotta be boss of everything.'

'Not here she doesn't,' said Ms Hennessey. 'And don't bother adding your tuppence worth, Cloris. I'm quite able. . . .'

'But Ms Hennessey. . . .' Lavender broke in.

'Start!' yelled Ms Hennessey. 'Tom. Your line.'

'Which one, Ms Hennessey?'

'The . . . last . . . line . . . you . . . said . . . ' said Ms Hennessey.

Tom Colman: Your step-daughter, ma'am. A lovelier, more luscious little dish'd be very hard to find.

Lavender Gibson (To the two lounging guards who have just come in): Guards! Guards! Bring her forth. Bring her forth.

Griller Spinks (as Guard No. 1): Bring 'er what, lady?

Lavender Gibson: Forth! You dolt, you dolt.

Squeaky Simpson (as Guard No. 2): Don't get yer knickers in a knot.

Lavender Gibson: Bring her forth, I say.

Griller Spinks: No sweat, lady. (Exit the two guards, stage right.)

Lavender Gibson (In a fury and to the Mirror): And you, you glass-eyed, bug-eyed freak – I'll have you hanged, shot, boiled in oil, bombed, torn limb from limb and otherwise obliterated. (chases Mirror around stage)

At which point Lavender Gibson proved to Ms Hennessey and to Tom Colman exactly what she meant. She chased The Mirror all around the stage and caught him when he was truly puffed. She then lifted him up from the floor by his shirt and shook him like a rat caught by a dog, until the insides of his head rattled and he started to choke. Great rattling gurgles issued from my throat.

'Put him down, Lavender. Put him down I say,' yelled Ms Hennessey. 'Put him down, girl!'

I think Lavender Gibson was actually trying to put me down, but not quite in the way Ms Hennessey meant. One more shake and I'd have been put down for good.

'All for today, pets. That's my lot for now.' Ms Hennessey breathed very heavily. 'God knows what made me take this on.'

'Youse lot givin' my Mrs Smith a hard time of it, eh?' It was Mr Alf Smith, our Ms Hennessey's husband. Dear old friend and coach of those far-off soccer days. We crowded round him. 'Youse lot, 'ere, give Mrs Smith an 'ard time and youse lot got me to deal with.' Playfully he cuffed Griller, Bog and Lavender, but not me. I was still recovering from my choking spasm. 'Youse lot want me takin' over this 'ere play? Do ya?'

'Yeah. Reckon it'd be good, Alf. You do it, eh?' said Griller.
'Alfred, my dear, you're welcome to it,' said Ms Hennessey (Mrs Smith).

'You'd make a wonderful producer, Alf,' said Lavender Gibson, in that oily way she's got when she's around older and bigger men than me. 'You'd be a super producer. A real darling.'

'Yeah, well. We'll see about that. Pansy nonsense, ask me. Almost as bad as soccer. Now, youse lot. Twenty laps of this 'ere hall. You 'eard me. Get to it,' bellowed Alf.

This came as a bit of a surprise and shock to those of the drama team who had not played in our soccer side. The rest of us, even Grill and Lav, knew better than to argue with Mr Alf Smith. Twenty laps he called for. Twenty laps we did.

'It'll be fifty press-ups on top, if I catch any of youse lot givin' Shar, Mrs Smith 'ere, any more stick. Geddit?' Alf picked up Ms Hennessey's sheepskin and tapestry jacket and draped it round her shoulders. 'Come on then, girl,' he said. 'G & T time, eh?'

'I think I've earnt it, Alf. I think I've earnt it,' said Ms Hennessey, still breathing hard and leaning on his strong shoulder.

None of us hung round to see if Alf had any more physical ideas. 'Come on,' said Lav. 'I've gotta get to the shop. Now Poppy's got her sprained ankle I've gotta do just about everything. She wants boxes and stuff lumped around, and you can give me a hand.'

She took off and I was left to follow. I trotted after her. The story of my life.

'Poor Tom-tit,' whispered Cloris Brown, as we left the hall. 'What d'you see in her?'

'Stick it, Clo,' I said, sweetly. 'You're not half the person she is.'

'You're telling me, Tom-tit,' she smiled.

Cloris Brown has quite a nice smile, I thought, as I trudged after Lavender Gibson to the bike-racks. Really a very nice smile. Sort of restful.

What do I see in Lavender Gibson? I have often been given cause to wonder. Still, what does a snake see in a snake charmer? What

does a mongoose see in a cobra? What does Prince Philip see in Her Majesty? It seems to me we all have our places in life, and I reckon mine is probably always going to be six steps behind Lavender Gibson and sort of in the shade. Lavender Gibson casts quite a big shadow.

Mrs Poppy Gibson sat in an armchair in the middle of the Poppy G. Boutique and Accessory Bar. Her plastered foot and ankle rested on a stool, and she was sipping a glass of water that she plonked down on the accessory bar as we came in.

'I've seen better days, Tommy my love,' she replied to my greeting. 'Much better days. If only I hadn't given Cynthia the week off.' Cynthia was her shop worker, and yet another fly that buzzed round the honey-pot called Carlos Gibson, the son of her employer. 'Get me another glass of water would you, petal, and pop just a teensy slug of that vodka in it while you're out there. It seems to be helping me no end. The pain! I can't begin to describe it. Lavender, love, get those two parcels off to the post. When you get back you can vacuum the place. I really thought Carlos would've been here by now.'

If I knew Carlos Gibson, and I did know Carlos Gibson, I could have told Mrs Poppy Gibson that she was deluding herself. The Carlos Gibsons of this world quite simply never turn up anywhere where work is required.

'Tommy, love, the vacuum cleaner's in the cupboard under the sink. Would you mind being the sweetest angel?'

I was the sweetest angel. While Lav delivered parcels to the post and tidied racks and kept her mother's glass topped up, I vacuumed, dusted and kept her mother's glass topped up. It was just like home. And of course, as soon as we had done it all and it was time to close, who should stroll in but Carlos Gibson.

'Come to give me old Mum a helping hand,' he grinned.

'How sweet of you, love,' beamed Mrs Poppy Gibson, the mother of the animal. 'But you're just moments too late. These two good little fairies have done it all.'

Carlos winked at me behind his mother's back. If I'd been three times as big I'd have hit him.

'Help yourself to a Coke, love. Lavender and Tommy are just having one as a little reward. And keep away from my vodka, Carlos,' she yelled after him. 'Mumsy needs it more than you.'

Keep away from her vodka? What a hope. Carlos Gibson was an alcoholic as well as a smoker, and if God would just let me do an autopsy on him, now, I just know I'd find his liver as well as his lungs all rotted out and serve him right. It couldn't happen to a nicer person, ha ha ha ha.

'Close the door, petal, and pop the sign round,' said Mrs Poppy Gibson to me. 'Then let's just enjoy our drinkies for five minutes. Your dear old Mum's coming to ferry this poor, battered body home to bed.'

The poor, battered body looked fine to me. An older woman she may well be, and is, but there's still a load of life left in the very striking Mrs Poppy Gibson. Today she wore silver hair swept up from her face in sort of spikes and curls. She had on a very silky blue dress, quite low at the front where her size is somewhat like Lavender's. She had on a pair of very big blue glasses, and all her solid gold jewellery and chains that are her insurance against getting old.

'We settled down to our drinks and to wait for my Mum. 'I hope it's not hurting you too much.' I nodded at her ankle.

'No, dear. Not really,' Mrs Poppy Gibson pointed at her glass. 'And this helps to dull that pain a wee bit. Get me another, Tommy love.'

'How did you do it?' I asked.

'Silly old Poppy. Eugene had me schussing down the upper slopes. My dears, I can't begin to describe the beauty of it all. Super, brilliant day. Exquisite. An alpine dream come true. Going just the slightest bit too fast and caught my poor old ankle on a nasty bit of ice on the trickiest of turns. Good for nothing after that but the apres-ski. There you have it, my dears,' she spread her

hands.

'Load of bull, Mum,' said Carlos, drinking with so much enjoyment I simply knew there had to be more than just Coke in the can. 'Eugene told me what happened. You were on the little slope right down the bottom with all the other beginners. . . .'

'Carlos!' she warned.

He didn't take any notice. 'You got up a bit of steam and couldn't stop. . . .'

'Carlos!' Louder.

'And then . . . whammo! Straight, bang into the side of the men's loos. Eugene said you shoulda seen it. These two guys shot out still zipping up and. . . .'

Mrs Poppy Gibson picked up the nice blue metal crutch that matched her glasses and dress. She waved it around her head once or twice and then let fly. It caught Carlos right in the guts and he doubled over, roaring and groaning.

Oh, the sheer beauty of it all! The poetry! Joy flooded into my heart and soul. That dear, dear Mrs Poppy Gibson is sure one striking woman.

'Is this a private party or can anyone join in?' Mum came in the door. 'Oh, there you are Carlos. Sue's out in the car. What on earth's the matter with the boy, Flo? I couldn't cope with two invalids in the family at one time.'

Griller Spinks found his first, and only, customer. Cloris Brown can now be seen biking up and down our green and leafy street all the time.

There are not a great number of the elderly in our suburb who have dogs that need taking for walks. Either that or the sight of Griller Spinks in their doorways really did curdle their blood and they said no just to get rid of him.

Old Mrs Mumford didn't get rid of him, though. She can't see too well and is stone deaf and lives over the back of our place. Her bad eyesight is quite a help when it comes to Griller. She

thinks he's the man from the council come to fix her pipes. Sometimes she thinks he's from Social Welfare and has just been sent to give her a hand with anything she wants done. She hasn't got a dog, only a goldfish called Bubbles. As Grill says, it's a bit hard to take a goldfish for a walk.

Old Mrs Mumford has made a list for Griller. She calls him 'my good man' and if she has her way she'll wear him down to a shadow of his former self. So far he's unblocked two drains and dug out an old hedge, and she's getting him to go with her to choose wallpaper for her back bedroom. It will be most interesting to see what sort of taste a half blind old lady and Griller Spinks have in wallpaper.

Quite a lot of old Mrs Mumford's dug-out hedge is now over on our side of the fence, along with a fairly big collection of rusty tins, bones and very old bottles. My Dad is less than happy about this.

Cloris Brown's bike riding is something else. 'Goodness, it's you, Tom Colman,' she said.

'Who else did you think it might be, Clo?' I said.

'Fancy seeing you round here.'

'I live here, Clo. But you don't. You live right over on the other side. What d'you want?'

'Just love the trees along this street. I bike along here all the time.'

'I never seen you bike along here before, Clo. And the trees may look lovely to the casual biker, but you should try raking up all the leaves in autumn. I do the whole lot. Mum and Dad let me out to the neighbours to do all the work when the leaves start to fall. I think they pay Mum and Dad for it. Not that I ever see any of it.'

'You sure go on, Tom. That's one thing I always noticed about you, Tom.' She smiled, waved and biked on.

Cloris Brown really does have the nicest of smiles. A most pleasant smile set in a most pleasant face.

'Who was that, Tom-tit?' Lavender Gibson biked up. Obviously

she hadn't been close enough to see.

'No one you know, Lav,' I smiled very nicely at her. 'And don't call me Tom-tit.'

CHAPTER FIVE

In which being a mirror is not as easy as it sounds

It's not easy, this acting game. 'How can I really *be* a mirror, Ms Hennessey?' I ask her. 'You reckon we've got to *feel* our characters and be our parts. How can I *be* a mirror?'

'Just reflect on it a while longer, Tom,' says Ms Hennessey.

This is of very little help. I've asked Mum and she's no help, either. I've asked Dad and he said, 'Why not ask your mate in the bathroom? The two of you have a very close relationship. Ask him. You're forever talking to him.'

Desperate, I tried even this. I pressed myself to our bathroom mirror and all I got for my trouble was bits of old toothpaste all down the front of my new jersey and I smelt a bit like a stale peppermint.

Cold. Glassy. Hard and silvery. I must, I must try harder. 'There's an old window out in the shed,' said my sister, Sue. 'Why don't you go out and I'll bash you over the head with it? It should be of some help. You can tell me how it feels. No? Well, you can't say I'm not prepared to do my best to help you.'

Lavender Gibson (as the Wicked Queen):

And you, you glass-eyed, bug-eyed freak – I'll have you hanged, shot, boiled in oil, bombed, torn limb from limb and otherwise obliterated.

(Chases Mirror around stage.)

Tom Colman: (as the Mirror):

A well-aimed stone'd do the job just as well.

Lavender Gibson: Get out! Get out! Get out!

Even Lavender Gibson had the sense not to push Ms Hennessey too often or too far. Today she knocked me around more

moderately. Well, moderately for Lavender. I was quick enough to get out of her way when she aimed the odd kick or two when Ms Hennessey's back was turned.

*Tom Colman: That's all the thanks I get
For showing what is right.*

*Don't blame me you're getting old
And turning into a fright.*

(The two guards drag in Snow White.)

*Lavender Gibson (to the two guards):
Who's this?*

Maggie Smith (as Snow White):

I'm Snow White and I'm quite delicious.

*Lavender Gibson (stalks around the stage like a panther and then
around Snow White):*

You wretched worm!

Ho ho ho, I'll see you squirm.

*Is this all I get in return for providing you with a home, with
motherly love and with everything else a young girl could want?*

Maggie Smith (to the guards):

Who's the old dame, boys?

(Goes on filing her nails.)

Lavender Gibson: Quiet! You unfeeling little monster.

(Walks round and round Snow White and then speaks to Mirror.)

Are you sure this is the one?

Tom Colman: Lovely, ain't she? A real little bottler, as we say.

Oh, how on earth is an actual person to be a mirror? I have reached the conclusion that it's quite impossible. Quite simply I am not built the right way. It's O.K. for the likes of the Ms Hennesseys of this world to say, 'It's important, pets, to suspend our beliefs,' which means that anyone can get away with being just about anything, including playing the part of a human-being mirror.

To lend a bit of strength to Ms Hennessey making a human into a mirror, I get to walk around the stage carrying an old, empty

picture frame. It's got my face and head and shoulders instead of a picture because I look right through the middle of it all the time. Picture enough, eh?

Maggie Smith: Would someone mind telling me what all this nonsense is about? I've got a handsome prince coming for drinks at six and I need some time to titivate.

Lavender Gibson (to guards):

Guards! A word. (Takes guards to one side of stage.)

I want her disposed of.

Griller Spinks (evilily): You want 'er rubbed out?

Lavender Gibson: You've got the number, man.

Squeaky Simpson (even more evilily): What's in it for us?

Lavender Gibson: The honour of the crown. Of serving us, my man.

Griller Spinks: That's no jam on our bread, lady.

Squeaky Simpson: And talking of bread. . .

Lavender Gibson (throws up hands in despair):

The quality of the hired help one gets these days cuts one to the quick. Now, then, listen. . .

Griller Spinks: Spell it out, lady.

Lavender Gibson: It doesn't need any spelling, buffoon. You know precisely what I mean.

Squeaky Simpson: You mean . . . do 'er in?

Lavender Gibson: That's the biscuit. That's exactly what I mean. Do 'er in and don't let me down.

(Queen exits pulling Mirror by the frame. Snow White, escorted by the two guards, starts walking. Enter forest, stage right.)

'Enough, pets. Enough. We'll do it again. Anyway, the forest's not here for this rehearsal,' said Ms Hennessey.

'When do we get to work with the dwarfs and the forest, Ms Hennessey?' asked Lavender.

'Not for as long as possible, pets. You lot are more than enough for me at the moment. Nineteen dwarfs and eight trees are the last things I need hanging about. Now, pets, let's get back to it

and do it again. Dwayne, I want you truly gruesome. Don't forget. You, Squeaky, Percy, I mean, I want you to be a really nasty, nasty wee thing. The humour is in the contrast between your size and Dwayne's size. Don't forget, my little one, you simply must be as nasty as Dwayne.' Ms Hennessey flung her arms about in a lovely theatrical way. 'Let's take it from the top now. Come on.'

'The where, Ms Hennessey?'

For the next hour we took it from the top, the bottom, the middle and everywhere else Ms Hennessey could think of. Then we got to put it together with the first bit. We worked flat out until Lav had to go to look after the shop while Mum took Mrs Poppy Gibson to Accident and Emergency at the hospital to get her ankle checked.

'Can I walk home with you, Tommy?' asked Cloris Brown.

'Please yourself,' I said, graciously. 'Except you do live the other way and don't call me Tommy.'

Griller passed us by the bike-sheds. He had Squeaky Simpson stacked under one arm. 'Old Mrs Mumford wants a bit of weedin' done, eh?'

I sighed. A little bird told me just who'd be doing the weeding. A leopard is a leopard is a leopard, spots or not.

'Squeaks, 'ere, he just said he'd gizza hand. Dinya, Squeaks? Eh? Good, eh?' said Griller.

'Eek,' said Squeaks, or something like it.

'Kill two birds with the one stone, eh? Old Squeaks, 'ere, he'll be doin' his community service, too, eh?' said Grill. He winked at me. 'Don' youse two be doin' anything I wouldn't do. Where's Gibbo?'

Cloris shuddered as we moved away. She has a rather nice little shudder. 'Ooooh, he's such an animal, that Griller,' she said. 'He gives me the creeps.'

'Grill's got a heart of gold, Cloris,' I said.

'You can tell that to the birds,' she said, firmly. 'Or to Squeaky

Simpson. Anyway, lets you and me forget them. It's us I want to talk about. Just you and me. Until you and me got in this play together, I always thought you were a right little . . . I never really knew you.'

'Don't be stupid, Cloris. We've been at school together and in the same class since right back when we first started.' What was all this about? You and me? Cloris Brown? Cloris Brown was no more than one of the very, very many like her who were so up themselves they never ever noticed men like me. Nothing like Lav. Lavender and me had always been together, and we always had each other to talk to and never worried that no one else talked to us – except Boggy, when he got out here from Rumania and Sydney-side a couple of years back.

'It's just that I can see, Thomas, and you mustn't mind that I call you that, because it's your name anyway, that you've developed.' She looked me up and down. 'Well, in some ways you have, I think. You have for me, anyway. Maybe it's seeing you so masterful on the stage.'

Masterful, eh? 'And don't call me Thomas even if it is my name.'

'You run rings round Lavatory Gibson, Tom. You do. You really do,' Clo smiled that sweet smile of hers that I'm getting to know quite well.

'Well, it's in the play. I'm supposed to do all that running,' I said.

'It's not that,' said Cloris. 'It's, well, it's hard to put it really. It's, sort of, just that you can act the pants off that . . . off that Lavender Gibson. That's it in a nutshell.'

A very strange way of putting it, I thought. Still, it was nice to hear. 'You really think so, Clo?'

'Yep. Sure do. I do, indeed. You're an actor. A real actor. I wouldn't mind betting you'll soon be on telly. I don't know what as, but I know you've got it. Not like that . . . not like Lavender Gibson. Let's face it. There's nothing much to her part, anyway. Anyone could do it, and the Wicked Queen is just Lavender Gibson in a long dress. But with you, it's all different. It must

be so very, very hard to play a mirror,' said Cloris.

'It surely is, Clo, and it's nice to talk to someone who truly understands,' I said.

'Oh, from where I'm sitting, over on the corner of the stage, it's quite obvious that, just like Ms Hennessey says, you're investing your part with a real individual character all its own. It's amazing, Tom. When I look at you, now, well, I really do see a mirror.'

'Oh, Clo. You really think so, Clo? Truly?' I looked at her. Yes, I could absolutely see she meant what she said and wasn't making it up. I can always tell with these things. It was easy for me to see that Clo Brown was being real sincere.

Cloris Brown. A very nice sort of person, really. Well, more than a person – a girl. A very nice and attractive sort of girl. Quite a lovely sort of girl, really. A young woman in full bud, as you might say. A rose by any other name, quite likely. Personally, if my name was Cloris any other name could only be better. A perfect sort of young woman to play that wonderful stage part, Juliet Capulet, particularly when she can do a posh voice so easy. Tom Colman as Romeo Montague? Cloris Brown as Juliet Capulet? Quite a team.

We biked in silence for a while. This is essential as you go round the roundabout and through the lights. You need one hand free to do the fingers at mad-dog motorists who get the only kicks in their dull lives by trying to squash kids on bikes flat.

'Just one more thing before I buzz off,' said Cloris as we made it successfully through the jungle of traffic. 'You mustn't have so many doubts about yourself. There's no need. Really there isn't.' Cloris smiled a sort of soft, sweet smile. 'No need for you to have doubts at all.'

'I didn't know I had any, Clo,' I said.

'Well you have. I put it all down to your being too close friends with that big, er . . . with, er . . . Lavender Gibson. She sucks all your confidence from you. She does. I've seen it. All the other girls say so, too. I sometimes think . . . but, no, I must go. . . .'

Off she bikes. Her long, straight brown hair flew out behind her like the robes of a flying brown nun. A real lovely sight.

'What d'you know about women, Bog?' We were in his front room where he should have been practising a bit of music called a sonata. A poem in sound, if you go for that sort of thing. That's what Mrs Lupescu, Boggy's Mum and musical trainer, calls it, anyway.

'As much as you, Tom.'

'In other words, Bog, we couldn't, not even together, write a book on the subject.'

'Well, I guess I could do about half a page if I wrote big. Besides, I haven't got the time, what with all the music.'

'Have you ever thought of being a priest, Bog?' I could have bitten the tongue from my head for not thinking. But, the words were out and said. The last thing, ever, that anyone in this family could possibly think of being. I could have kicked myself and I just hoped that his mother or father weren't listening to our conversation at the keyhole. Priest? Hardly. My big suspicions that this Central European family were close connections of the great and bloody Count Dracula of movie and T.V. fame sure ruled out Boggy ever being a priest.

'What's being a priest got to do with women, Tom?' Bog asked.

I had to get off this hook real quick. 'Nothing. Nothing at all, really. I was just thinking how it's a bit unfair that the Pope, you know, the big boss of the Catholics, he won't let women be priests. It's discrimination, I think.'

'Yeah. It is a pity. Lavender Gibson would've made a great priest, eh?' said Bog.

'I think Lavender Gibson would make a great anything,' I said.

'Yeah,' said Bog. 'You told me last week there was enough of Lavender Gibson to make two of anything.'

There were little hooks, nasty little hooks, all over this talk I was having with him. Dear God, I hope he'll never tell her I said that. 'Besides, she's not a Catholic. It's Carlos Gibson who's a

Catholic and they'd never make him a priest. Not ever. Not in a month of Sundays, ha ha ha ha.' Carlos Gibson a priest? Even I could get a laugh out of that one. If Carlos Gibson had been born an Italian and not a Portuguese, he'd have been in the Mafia, and we all know what they do, cutting off horses' heads and all that. You see it on telly all the time. Truly lovely. 'This conversation is going nowhere,' I said to Bog but didn't mention, of course, that it had been my great skill that had achieved this. 'Nowhere at all.'

'Your conversations often go nowhere, Tom,' said Bog. 'Mum, said you can stay for dinner.'

Lasagne again? This quaint mince dish from Central Europe, with solid lumps of spaghetti in it, is just about the only thing the Lupescus ever eat. Or that's how it appears on the surface. 'That'd be nice, Bog. What about Cloris Brown?'

'I'm not asking her to dinner, Tom. Besides, she's not even here.' He looked out a window.

Sometimes his music went to his head and he didn't seem to function like a normal person, or me. I sighed, 'What do you think of Cloris Brown?'

'I don't think of her much at all. She's all right.' He looked at me. 'What do you think of her?'

'Well, not much. Not until sort of recently. Don't you think she's sort of, well er . . . er . . . sort of lovely? You know. All that straight brown hair and her long neck like a goose and her long legs, too. Very long legs she's got.'

'Yeah. She has got long legs,' said Bog. 'Cloris Brown's legs are just about as long as the whole of you.'

'And you, Bog,' I said. 'You, too.'

'She looks O.K. I guess. Can't think why you're so worried about it. She's not my sort or your sort, Tom. She goes with that guy in Room 17 all the time. Don't think she'd even wipe her nose with you, Tom,' he said. 'Or me, either, come to that. Not Cloris Brown. Only thing you'n me have got in common with Cloris

Brown is we're all in Ms Hennessey's play together.'

I drew myself up to my full height and smiled at Bog in an older, more mature sort of way. 'I wouldn't be too sure about that, Boggy,' I said.

We had lamb chops for dinner. They were overdone and this surprised me. Still, anything's better than lasagne and there wasn't a whiff of garlic anywhere.

Of all the rooms in our house I often think my very favourite one is our bathroom. It's got a good strong lock on the door, a heater on the wall and a nice, full-length mirror in a wooden frame.

'Oh, mirror, mirror on the wall. Tom Colman wants to grow more tall.' And, just looking into it, I believe I have. Miracle of miracles, it's coming. A whole lot of little nicks in the side of the frame tell the story of my growing and, yes, there's a centimetre more of me today than there was only a handful of weeks ago. It's a slow and painful job. Still, we're getting there, my body and me.

Shower and shave. Well, shower and then lather up with Dad's shaving foam and a quick practice dragging off the soap with the back of my toothbrush.

Another admiring look in the mirror. 'Eat yer heart out, Carlos Gibson!' Might take a year or two more, but at least it's coming. A few choice poses just to give the old ego a bit of a boost. (The ego is what lives inside all of us and it's a thing we must not lose sight of if we are to grow into well-rounded persons.)

A lift of the eyebrow here and there. A wink. Hmm, yes. Maybe Cloris Brown can see something in me I can't quite spot myself. Another lift of the old eyebrow. Not too bad. Yes, Thomas, you've sure got something.

Two women, eh? Two of them. Both after whatever it was I can't quite spot in the mirror. Another lift or two of the eyebrow. Just could be it. Surely does give a dash of Carlos Gibson-type sex appeal. Truly. Practice makes perfect. Try it again.

Two women? Three? Four? Absolutely a possibility for sure. Still, two for now is quite enough and the rest are well worth waiting for. Two women? In truth, one and a half, really. Just hope that the one doesn't spot the half and I get to be the meat in the sandwich. One centimetre more of meat is quite O.K. but there still wouldn't be that much of a filling – not when the toast-slice was Lavender Gibson!

'Mum. Mum. Come quick,' it was Sue, outside the door. She's forever in the bathroom, my sister. I don't know why because it doesn't help much. 'Mum. I think the little pest's gone down the plughole. Thank God. Come on Tommy. Come out of there! Carlos is picking me up in half an hour and I've got to do my hair.'

I practised the eyebrow lift a few more times. Carlos Gibson – eat yer heart out!

CHAPTER SIX

In which we can't see wood for the trees

'I've said it before and I'll say it again,' said Ms Hennessey. 'I did not promise you anything but blood, sweat and tears. It's work, work and more work. The rewards come later.'

'That's O.K. for her to say. I had a feeling that the blood, sweat and tears bit was all there'd ever be, and the rewards would be nothing more than yet another teacher-type con. But, who am I to argue?

'If a job's worth doing, it's worth doing well,' said Ms Hennessey. The older this dear lady gets the more she proves the old saying about being tarred with the same brush. It could be kindly old Mr Harvey talking. It could be the elderly and almost retired Miss Webster, our class teacher. The same brush? The same can of tar, too, I reckon.

Cloris Brown (as the Reader):

And the guards took Snow White and marched into the forest. (Forest of trees shuffles across stage engulfing Snow White and the guards. They push their way through the tangle of branches.)

'Ms Hennessey! Ms Hennessey!' it was Lavender Gibson leaning out from the side of the stage. 'I really do think, Ms Hennessey, that the Wicked Queen would track Snow White and the guards quite a long way into the forest. I do. I know she would. I would.'

'For God's sake, Lavender Gibson, get off that stage. Get off it! If you don't get off, there'll be no Wicked Queen.'

'But, Ms Hennessey. . .'

'Get off!!' A real roar.

Cloris Brown: After a march of many hours they come to the very deepest part.

(Forest now stands very still at back of stage.)

Griller Spinks (as Guard No. 1):

D'you reckon this is the very deepest part of the forest?

Squeaky Simpson (as Guard No. 2):

I reckon so.

(Guard No. 1 twirls machine-gun on finger and Guard No. 2 swings two or three bicycle chains.)

Maggie Smith (as Snow White): If you ask me, I'm not so sure.

Griller Spinks: No one's askin' you sister. Come on, man (to other guard) let's be gettin' it done. Let's do 'er.

Squeaky Simpson: I'm not so sure. (Walks round Snow White.) What's she done that's so bad?

Griller Spinks: That's not our business. Orders is orders for the likes of us.

(Snow White takes out Thermos and pours a cuppa.)

Squeaky Simpson: Yeah, man. But what difference does it make if we just leave 'er 'ere? The Wicked Old Queen'll never know.

'Ms Hennessey! Ms Hennessey!' out from behind the curtain again. 'It doesn't say Wicked Old Queen in the script. It doesn't say old. He put that in. Squeaky Simpson put that in on purpose. The Wicked Queen isn't old at all. She's quite young. I reckon she married Snow White's father when he was old and she was a child bride. She's not old and Squeaky Simpson put that in. He did.'

'And I'll put you out, Lavender Gibson. Get off that stage. I'll put you out, girl,' said Ms Hennessey.

'Put her down'd be a better idea,' Cloris Brown giggled and whispered in my ear as we waited off stage.

'Ssshh,' I said. 'Ms Hennessey'll hear you.' In truth, it wasn't Ms Hennessey's ears I was worried about.

Griller Spinks: Seems to me it's six of one and half a dozen of the other. Either we do 'er in now, or the bears and wolves'll finish 'er off in the night.

Squeaky Simpson: Yeah, well, least that way it won't be on our conscience.

Griller Spinks (scratches head): On our what?

Maggie Smith (packing away Thermos): I wish someone'd ask me what I want.

Griller Spinks: What you want, sister, is nuthin' to do with this part of the story.

Maggie Smith: Seems to me it's everything to do with it. Abducted from my place of residence, nicked from my home, dragged head-first into a jungle. . . . Look at me when I'm talking to you, man. (Prods Guard No. 1.) Just look at me! Snow White, innocent, quite delicious and a lot more besides; off to meet her doom – bears, wolves, machine pistols – what does it matter? And you two can't even be bothered consulting me. I mean to say. . . .

Squeaky Simpson: She's got a point there.

Griller Spinks: Maybe she 'as, maybe she 'asn't. O.K. then, we'll leave 'er.

Squeaky Simpson: I'm glad you see things my way.

Griller Spinks (drags Guard No. 2 to other side of stage and away from Snow White): What if she follers us back? What then, eh? We'll all be in the poo, me, 'er and you.

Squeaky Simpson: We could put 'er on 'er honour.

Griller Spinks: Honour! Honour! (Guards both sound 'h' in word 'honour'.) What dame you ever come across 'ad any honour?

'Ms Hennessey! Ms Hennessey! Guess who? 'That's absolutely sexist and absolutely not acceptable. You and me, and women like us have a responsibility. . . '

'Lavender Gibson, pet. Don't get me wrong when I say this.' Ms Hennessey used all her clenched teeth. 'But I don't need you any more today, pet. So, Lavender Gibson, GET!!!' Ms Hennessey smiled very, very sweetly and said, 'Don't anyone else here open even a corner of their mouths other than to pour forth the immortal words of my script. Shall we start?'

We started.

Griller Spinks: Honour! Honour! What dame you ever come across 'ad any honour?

Squeaky Simpson: I got it! (Slaps knee.)

Griller Spinks: What you got, eh?

Squeaky Simpson: You'll see. (Calls.) Snow White!

Maggie Smith: What now? I thought you two had gone. (Sighs.) When I got up this morning I just felt it in my bones that this wasn't going to be my day.

Squeaky Simpson: How'd you like a game of hide-and-seek, Snow White?

Griller Spinks: Huh?

Maggie Smith: Now I've heard everything. Hide-and-seek?

Squeaky Simpson: Aw, come on, Snow White. Be a sport, eh.

Maggie Smith (shrugs shoulders): Well, if that's what you want, who am I to argue? Who's going to be 'he'?

Griller Spinks: You. Who else? You'd make a good 'e.'

Maggie Smith (delicately): Me? A 'he'? You must be joking. (Humours them.) Oh, all right then. Whatever you say.

Griller Spinks: Gee, that'd be real choice. Thanks Snow White.

Maggie Smith: Right. I'll shut my eyes and count to twenty. Off you go. (Snow White counts slowly to seven or eight and then gabbles through the rest to twenty.) Coming, ready or not! (The guards have sneaked off through the forest that has begun to shuffle again. Snow White searches.)

Lavender had not gone far when ordered by Ms Hennessey to 'GET!!' As she would say herself, 'You can't keep a good woman down.' Well, a good person.

Now, we were all grouped round our producer, discussing costumes.

'No sweat, pets,' said Ms Hennessey. 'And Mrs Gibson has

promised to give us a hand. She says she's got enough old gear to dress the show ten times over.

'Snow White is to look a floating dream in white and with a blue cloak. The Wicked Queen is to be all stately in flowing, dramatic purples, lime greens, black and mauve. She'll wear a crown. The guards, bless them, are bikies. Have you got a leather jacket, old and tattered jeans and a few bicycle chains, Dwayne?'

'Got the old jeans, Ms Hennessey. Reckon I'll pick up the rest, easy, Ms Hennessey.'

'What about the Mirror?' I asked.

'His sister, Sue, says to squash him between two panes of glass, Ms Hennessey,' said Lavender, very nastily. 'It doesn't matter what the stupid mirror wears and I think the squashing bit is a good idea.' I noticed she was looking at Clo Brown and not at me.

'But what?' I persisted.

Ms Hennessey smiled. 'Little black jacket and black tights, Tom. That's what.'

'Tights?' I squeaked more than Squeaky.

'That'll look super,' said Cloris.

'Not tights,' I said, feeling prickly all over.

'What are you worried about, Tom-tit?' said Lavender. 'You got nothing to hide, ha ha ha. I think tights'd be real lovely for Tom, Ms Hennessey. Very tight ones, too.'

'No more gardening, Grill. Please,' said Squeaky Simpson as he trailed off after Maggie and Griller. 'I done enough.'

'Old Mrs Mumford wants all that back bit dug, Squeaks. You're real good at it, too, Squeaks. Come on. We'll be late and she doesn't like us late.'

'Yeah, Grill, but all you do is sit inside and have cups of tea. I do all the work,' said Squeaky.

'That's not fair, Squeaky Simpson,' said Maggie. 'Gwiller is doing heaps for that little old lady, and all you do is complain. Gwiller

says it's not her garden that's her weal problem, it's her loneliness, and his cups of tea and talks do more for her than all your digging. Don't you be so selfish.'

'Well,' said Squeaky. 'Let me have the cups of tea and talks, then, for a change.'

'You're too small, Squeaky,' said Maggie. 'She wants a real man to have tea with, and to talk about the wallpaper with. If you ask me, Squeaky, with all he's done for old Mrs Mumford, Gwiller's going to win Mr Harvey's community service award.'

'Yeah,' said Squeaky, bitterly. 'He'll win the award and I'll have done the work.'

'That's life, Squeaky,' said Maggie. 'And it might be your muscle, Squeaky, but it's Gwiller's bwains.'

'Yeah, Squeaks,' said Griller. 'It's all my brains. 'Now, come on. She's gonna show me old photos and stuff today, if we get through lookin' in the wallpaper book.'

'What are you going to do, Lav?' I asked as we wheeled our bikes through town and towards the Poppy G. Boutique and Accessory Bar. 'For your community service thing, I mean.'

'What's it to you?' said Lavender, sourly. 'What do you care? A little bird tells me you've got other interests to fry these days, and why aren't you biking with them now?'

Ho, ho, ho. 'Aw, come on, Lav.'

'I smell a viper in my bosom,' said Lav, very, very nastily.

'Where?' I looked before I realised it was just Lav being all dramatic. Romeo and Juliet again quite likely.

'And if that little viper doesn't pull its head in I'm going to wring its scrawny neck,' said Lavender.

'I don't think vipers have necks, Lav. Least, they don't have necks at all or, if you look at them another way, they're all neck and nothing else.' I gave her a kindly smile to make her feel better. 'They're snakes,' I said.

'I know what they are, dummo, and stop drivelling on.'

This was not proving a happy conversation at all. 'What are you going to do for your community service, Lav? Bog and I have cleaned out the wishing well down the park.' It had been truly amazing to discover the objects that some people used for making a wish.

'What time have I had? I ask you. Poppy flat on her back, and watching I don't get stabbed in mine.' She shot me a sly sort of look.

'Poppy's not flat on her back, Lav,' I said.

'She may as well be. I'm run off my poor feet.'

'That's what my Mum says, too. She doesn't say that you're run off your feet but she says that your mother runs her, my mother, off *her* feet. Get it?'

'No,' said Lav. 'And what with Eugene back in Pocatello, Idaho, for his vacation and Carlos more useless than ever. . . .'

'Yes, he sure is,' I agreed quickly and happily.

'My community service is my mother. I am her help and support,' said Lavender.

'Well, she has got her crutches, too.'

'However,' she went on very grimly. 'I do have one or two plans.'

'Yeah? What?' I asked.

'Never you mind, Tom-tit. You clean up this rotten community in your way, and leave me to clean it up in mine. You'll see.'

'What then?'

'It's a biggie, this one.'

'What is?'

'I'm not going to tell you, Tommy. Not yet. It'll make the headlines and the front page in the *Greenhill Gazette*.'

'Anything makes the headlines in the *Gazette*, Lav,' I said. 'Even a cat up a tree and the fire brigade getting it down.'

'This is no cat up a tree, Tom,' said Lavender. 'If you want to be part of it, be on the steps of the branch library at quarter past seven Friday night. All will be revealed then. It'll make anything you and Boggy do, and old Mrs Mumford and all the rest, fade

into the shadows. Come on. Get a move on. I've got to do Poppy's banking, and you've got to do the vacuuming. She reckons you do it like no one else, ever.'

'I'm not surprised,' I said. 'I've had more practice than most people.'

'Lavender Gibson says she's going to wring your neck, Clo.' We were on the phone. What heaven! And I must speak to Mum and Dad. A phone in the bathroom would be real bliss. The ultimate.

'I'd like to see her try,' said Cloris.

'So would I, Clo,' I breathed. So would I!!

'What do you mean, Tommo?' She sounded a bit upset.

'Aw, nothing. Not really, Clo.' Two women fighting over me? Could I believe it? No, I couldn't. 'And you take no notice of Lav Gibson, Clo. She'd never try.' Would she? I wasn't too sure. 'She'd never go that far, Clo. You mark my words.'

Cloris Brown breathed more easily into her mouth-piece. 'If you say so, Tommo. Me? I reckon Lav Gibson is just one big bag of air. What a bag!' She giggled. 'Have you ever thought what Lavatory Gibson and Griller Spinks'd be like together?' She giggled even more. 'They'd be like two big battleships in a bathtub.'

I was beginning to feel just a little tiny bit guilty at this, for all it was so very thrilling just hearing her voice coming at me down the line and into my ear. 'Tee hee hee hee,' I said to her. 'In a bathtub? That's good. That's a real good one.' What a sense of humour this lovely girl had! She sure knew how to get a man going, did Clo Brown.

It was so much easier by phone. No having to turn around all the time, checking to see who might be waiting at my shoulder. I looked around me, anyway, into the darkness of our hallway. Couldn't be too careful. As I listened to that honey sort of voice, I unscrewed the mouthpiece. Check for bugs. Seen this on telly. Can't be too careful. What does a bug look like? Well, there were

two, small and very dead moths. . . .

'And now she's all so secretive about this big-time community service thing of hers on Friday. As if anyone cares. Me? I'm not doing one. My Dad says if old Harvey wants this community cleaned up he can just do it himself, and get his lazy teachers to give him a hand. You can catch all sorts of things picking up rubbish in parks.'

'Yeah,' I breathed. 'You're so right, Clo.' I could just see her, all that brown hair waving about, and her hands stroking, just softly stroking it all. Well, one hand stroking her hair and the other holding the receiver. 'I guess we'll have to wait till Friday to see what Lavender Gibson's going to do, Clo,' I said.

'You're not going, Tommo! You're not.' A sharp edge to Cloris's voice of honey.

'Er . . . well . . . er, well . . . thought I'd . . . I'd just see what she's up to and all that. Sort of . . . could be one big . . . er, laugh.'

'You wouldn't catch me anywhere near Lavender Gibson if I had any choice in the matter at all,' said Cloris and her voice stopped being like honey and was more like lemon juice.

'No, well, it might be safest, Clo, if you didn't go. I don't think Lav'd want to catch you anywhere near her, either.' On the other hand, knowing Lav, this might be the very thing that she did want. Human relationships! I'll never understand them, no matter how hard I study the *Reader's Digest*.

'Tommo, you little icicle, you, I'd really rather you didn't go.' The honey was back, and she whispered so very, very softly. 'Who needs Lavender Gibson? Who needs *her*?'

'Well, her mother needs her at the moment, Clo, what with her ankle and all that.'

'You should hear what my mother says about *her* mother, Tommo. You wouldn't ever, ever believe. . . .'

I didn't quite get to hear this truly interesting bit. The living-room door behind me was rudely flung open and Dad yelled. 'Get off that phone. Your sister wants it. God knows why I have it

in the house at all — I never get to use it. And Lavender's here to see you.'

Cloris got cut off in mid-sentence.

CHAPTER SEVEN

In which we try to develop our characters a bit further

'You'll find it can be of help, pets,' said Ms Hennessey, 'if you sort out a person you know who has something in their character that reminds you of the part you are playing.'

So far Lavender Gibson has taken a good close look at her mother, visited old Mrs Mumford with Griller, and watched Mrs Margaret Thatcher on the telly. 'I think I'm getting close,' she said. 'There is something in each of these women that reminds me of the Wicked Queen. I think it's the inner strength and wisdom they have.'

'You don't think they're all a bit old?' I asked her. 'After all, you did say you thought the Wicked Queen was a younger type of woman.'

'The essence I am looking for has nothing to do with age, and you might like to know I've also been taking a very close interest in Cloris Brown,' said Lavender. 'Although I wouldn't like to think that she's got anything *I* want, there sure is a big mean streak in her. Or it could be a yellow streak. And she's got dandruff. When she shakes that horrible mousey hair of hers everywhere, it sprays all over everyone like confetti.'

It seemed wise to stop this conversation. So I did.

Poor old Boggy's been tracking Carlos Gibson all around the place. I don't think anything will help poor Bog in his search for character. Tracking Carlos Gibson would only help if he was playing the part of a tom-cat. Secondly, nothing, nothing at all, is going to help Bogdan Lupescu turn into a handsome prince. Lavender reckons that when Maggie gets to kiss him in the play it'll be Bog's luck to turn into a frog.

'I think it's the way he sort of holds himself up and sticks his

chest out all the time,' said Boggy about Carlos Gibson. 'I'm gonna try that. But I'm sure never going to do to Maggie Smith what I saw Carlos doing to your sister,' he told me.

This sounded real good. 'What was he dong to my sister?'

'Something in her ears,' he said.

'Yeah. She sometimes seems stone deaf when I speak to her. He was probably whispering,' I said.

'With his tongue?' said Bog.

I can think of no one, absolutely no one, who can in any way help me to reach the central heart and being of my character, the Mirror. If only Ms Hennessey had made me one of the guards. I've asked her if Squeaky Simpson and me could swap. No luck at all. 'You are my quintessential Mirror, Tom,' she says. (I leave you to look that one up!)

In their search for character, Grill and Squeaks have visited the gang house in our suburb. You'd have thought they might have asked me to go with them. No. This shows just how far my luck has run out. 'Geez, it was choice. Real choice,' said Griller. 'Shoulda seen it! Geez. They give us three bottles of beer each, and they was torturin' this feller from another gang. All his teeth and finger nails and blood and stuff was everywhere. Shoulda heard them screams. Geez, it was choice. They was havin' a rumble.'

'No they wasn't, Grill,' said Squeak. 'Least not where I seen. They gizza cuppa tea and said they'd come to the play, and you said how about they take their ute round to old Mrs Mumford's and cart her dead hedge and all her bottles to the dump? They said yes and they gizza slice a cake.'

'Oh, Character, where can I find you?

Maggie Smith (as Snow White):

(Searches every nook and cranny of the stage and in the branches of all the trees.)

Cloris Brown (as the Reader): But to no avail. The guards had gone and Snow White wandered deeper into the deepest part of the forest,

pushing her way through the dense growth until, suddenly, a clearing spread in front of her. There, in the middle of the clearing, stood a little house. A very strange little house.

Maggie Smith: Aha; is that a house I see? I shall knock on the door.
(Knock. Knock.)

Voice: Who's there?

Maggie Smith: Snow White.

Voice: Snow White who?

Maggie Smith: Snow White who is very tired and wants to come in and have a nice hot meal and rest her weary head.

(Enter the dwarfs through the door of the roll-on, roll-off dwarf house. They encircle Snow White.)

They come out on their knees. The first time they toddled out it took them twenty minutes and Ms Hennessey started pulling out her wonderful head of flaming red hair. After that she pulled the hair out of quite a lot of the dwarfs' heads, too.

This really is the strangest family of dwarfs. Dear Ms Hennessey has not taken enough care in their selection, if she hopes our audience will think they are all related. They are a cross-section of the population of our suburb. There are nine white dwarfs. There are seven brown dwarfs – some from our own great nation, and some from the tropical island states of the South Pacific. There is a Kampuchean dwarf and a Sri Lankan dwarf and even a black Guyanese dwarf from far off South America. Unless Ms Hennessey can perform great miracles with the stage make-up, the audience will have to settle for the fact that one dwarf father had a lot of different wives or a dwarf mother had about eight or ten husbands.

Maggie Smith: (Snow White looks about her in amazement at all the very little folk.)

Some of them aren't all that little. One is the same size as Lavender and not much smaller than Grill. It's just that when they're on their knees and you squint up your eyes, they do look quite little

and cute. Ms Hennessey did not seem to find anything cute about them at all. As she knocked the poor wee folk into shape, it again struck me just how much of a teacher she has become. Is this really what soccer and drama can do to an open mind and a free spirit?

Maggie Smith: But who, who, who are all of you?

Dwarfs (in order):

I'm Ted, I'm Fred, I'm 'Arf Dead,

I'm Dumpy, I'm Grumpy, I'm Sam.

I'm Billy, I'm Tilly, I'm Dilly, I'm Silly,

I'm Barry, I'm Harry, I'm Pam.

I'm Boris, I'm Doris, I'm Morris,

I'm Arthur, I'm Martha, I'm Bob.

(All together.) The forest's our home. We never do roam, except when we're doing a job.

Maggie Smith (Snow White pats selected dwarfs on the head and shoulders): Oh, dear little dwarfs with legs so short, will you be my protectors and look after me, shelter and defend me and keep me from all harm?

Dwarf No. 1: You don't want much, do you lady?

Dwarf No. 2: What's in it for us?

Maggie Smith: The satisfaction of doing a good deed, and doing it well.

Dwarf No. 3: That's no jam on our bread, sweetie.

Maggie Smith: Do my ears deceive me, or have I heard that line somewhere before?

Dwarf No. 4: But we are the Nineteen Dwarfs. We have been put here in order to do good and when opportunity knocks (all dwarfs knock on the stage) who are we to argue? Truth to tell, it's not all that easy to find anything at all to do in the very deepest part of this forest. What did you say your name was?

Maggie Smith: Snow White, and I'm quite delicious.

Dwarf No. 5: The proof of the pudding's in the eating, lady. Come inside.

(The dwarfs toddle, in reverse order, into the dwarf house taking

Snow White with them.)

Another twenty minutes and a lot more hair on the stage. I could swear I spotted one or two gobs of blood, too.

'She'll never get it right, Thomasino,' whispered Cloris Brown.

'Shut up, Cloris,' yelled Ms Hennessey who has ears like a hawk.

'Really,' whispered Clo, even more softly. 'Why on earth does she think the stupid thing was written for seven dwarfs in the first place? Nineteen won't work. It can't. What a waste of time.'

Lavender wasn't needed for the dwarf bits. Neither was I, but I thought poor Ms Hennessey might need a hand. Lav was working for her mother, and at least this way I would miss the vacuum cleaning.

We did the dwarf bit three times, and it took two and a half hours. Halfway through, Mr Alf Smith arrived and, in his typical and kindly way, spotted the problem double quick. He took a branch from one of the trees and stood at the back of the line of dwarfs. 'Right, youse lot, from now on you'll all listen to me.' But he didn't do any talking. He just stood there sort of twitching the tree branch and it was really amazing just how quick that line of dwarfs got trained.

'I don't know what I'd do without you, Alfie,' said Ms Hennessey after we had finished.

'That's why ya married me, Shar,' he said. 'Reckon I'll be comin' along to train your dwarfs from now on.'

'It's not quite what I hoped.' She rubbed her forehead. 'I want them to get right to the heart of it. To be, to actually *be* dwarfs. It's so, so important that they feel their parts.'

'Don't you worry your pretty little head about that, Shar. No sweat. This little lot'll feel their parts all right,' said Alf.

The dwarfs finished their practice with twenty laps of the hall, the last one on their knees. The rest of us stood and laughed at them. We laughed very loudly at them, until Alf invited us to join them. There's no saying no to Alf Smith, soccer coach and

stage director. Truly one great marvel of a man.

As I said to Cloris Brown. 'It's not that I really want to go, Clo. It's just that I think it's my duty to turn up to make sure that Lavender Gibson does do the community service she reckons she's going to do. Put it down to my untrusting nature if you like. Nothing else, Clo.'

Cloris had sniffed. 'Put it that way, and I suppose you really do have a duty. If you find she doesn't do anything, you tell me, and I'll tell Mr Harvey and that will be my duty. And what's that sort of twitchy thing around your eye, Tom-Tom? You coming down with some sort of bug, or is it just the thought of Lavatory Gibson?'

It was drizzling with rain and Mum said, 'If you catch a cold you'll look after yourself. Put on your jacket and take a hat.'

It may be seen from this that not only am I the family slave, but I also never get looked after when I'm ill. It's just as well I don't get sick very often.

'And make sure you're home by nine-thirty. It's supposed to fine up tomorrow, and those lawns are growing wild in the spring warmth,' said Mum.

I sure knew what this meant! One day in the future, God help me to last so long, when my parents are dead and gone and I, their only son, have inherited the lot, it will be with the greatest of joy that I rip out all their hideous shrubs and trees and smother all that evil grass with green concrete.

The lights of the branch library shone dimly out the dirty windows and onto the lawn in front. This is where Lavender Gibson got us all together. Boggy and me, Lavender herself, Maggie Smith, Griller Spinks and Squeaky Simpson who has now become one of us. I was a little surprised that Grill hadn't brought along old Mrs Mumford. Old Mrs Mumford must be one strong lady, because Griller's friends and acquaintances usually have no option but to do exactly what he says, and go where he goes. One strong

person, all right.

'Come on, Gibbo. It's cold,' growled Grill. 'Feels like it's freezing me. . . .'

'Gwiller,' warned Maggie.

'What we gotta do, eh?'

'We're going to the pub,' said Lav.

'Geez, wow,' said Griller. 'Great. Reckon the gang'll be there if they finished their torturin'.'

'They won't let me in. I'm too small,' said Squeaky.

He had a point. 'We can't go to the pub, Lav,' I said.

'We're not going *in*,' said Lavender. 'Listen to me. We're protesting outside the pub. That's what we're doing. I've got sticks with placards on them out the back of Poppy's shop, and we're going to collect them as we go past.'

'What are we protesting about, Lav?' asked Boggy. 'Anyway, that's not a community service.'

'Oh yes it is,' said Lavender. 'This is clean-up time all right, and we're going to do some cleaning up. Tonight is the big finals of their Wet T-Shirt Competition.'

'Geez . . . real wow!' said Griller. 'You real sure we can get in, Lav?'

'Dwayne, listen to me.' Lavender spoke through gritted teeth and sounded just like Ms Hennessey. 'We are *not going in*! You, me, Bog, all the rest – and I did hope there'd be about twenty because that's how many placards I made – we're all going to protest against it outside the pub.'

'Whaffor?' asked Griller. 'What's so wrong with it, eh Lav?'

'It's against our equal and human rights as women. That's what's wrong with it,' said Lavender. 'It's sexist, it's anti-woman and I think it might be pornographic.'

'Porno wha?' Grill asked.

'You heard me, and we're protesting.' Lav got louder. 'It all goes dead against the person-hood of being a woman. It turns us feminists into objects, and it's disgusting. Apart from that, you

get dressed up in a wet T-shirt on a night like this and you'll catch your death of pneumonia or flu. Won't catch you men doing that, eh? Eh?' Lav's voice rose again. 'Not that I blame the men who are here. You're right on with us, here to fight for the cause in the front line beside us women. You're on our side.'

'We didn't know what side we was on, Lav,' said Boggy, reasonably. 'We didn't even know why you got us to come here. You didn't tell us, Lav.'

'No,' said Griller.

'No,' said Squeaky. 'And I don't think it's right, Lavender Gibson.'

'I know it's not right, Squeaky. I know it's not right and that's why we are going to make our voices heard against the exploitation of women in this sexist and racist society of ours. It's not good enough that to be a woman today means getting your poor body into a wringing wet T-shirt, just for the enjoyment of filthy and disgusting men.'

'Yeah. Be right 'orrible on a night like this,' said Griller. 'Be right 'orrible to 'old one, too.'

'I think they're for looking at, Grill. Not for holding,' said Boggy, quietly.

'I think we should take them some towels. Poor women, eh?' he started to sound a bit like he did when he got on to the cruel treatment of cats and dogs.

Lavender butted in. 'You're missing the point.'

'Wet T-shirt and you don't miss nothing, Lav,' said Boggy.

'That's what it's all about,' yelled Lavender. 'Let's clean up this rotten community in a real way! Are you with me?' She yelled even louder.

'Of course we're with you, sweetie,' said Maggie. 'Are you blind, Lav? Can't you see? We're wight in fwont of you.'

'After me!' yelled Lav. 'Right on, eh!'

We followed her down the hill to the Poppy G. Boutique and Accessory Bar. We got the signs out without her mother hearing. 'We can have two each and we've still got some left over for next

time,' said Lavender.

Through the mall and half a block on towards the lights, and the happy Friday night noise of the Greenhill Tavern and Bottlestore.

What happened next was a bit like a real juicy horror movie. You'd like to forget it, but it keeps sneaking back to haunt you. I can't forget it, anyway, because no one will let me, and my photo is there for all to see on the front page of the *Greenhill Gazette*. It is also framed and has been hung by my father on our kitchen wall. Oh, why couldn't they have found a cat up a tree that night?

The photo shows me just before the cops arrived waving my placard that reads, 'Down With Women'. The 'Being Exploited' bit had already got ripped off in the early stage of the battle. (Actually, it said 'Exported', but that is merely because Lavender Gibson cannot spell.) Whatever way you look at it, it adds up to disaster, and it's time Lavender Gibson *did* learn to spell. The battle? 'The Battle of Greenhill Tavern' was how the *Greenhill Gazette* described the event.

It all started nice and quiet. This was not surprising because we were in the wrong place. Lav got us all marching round in a circle in the yard outside the bottle-store and there was no one there. We could have been there for ever, nice and safe, if a little old interfering lady hadn't come along and said, 'You're in the wrong place, dears. Fun's all up the other end.' I don't know why she didn't mind her own business, and I don't think she was one of the competitors.

The 'fun', as she called it, surely was up the other end. We weren't the only protestors. Some of the biggest and toughest looking ladies I had ever seen in my whole life were already lined up and protesting around in a circle outside the main doors. So big and tough they were, that if one of *them* had played Snow White, Lav really could've been a dwarf. None of them looked like they'd be entering the Wet T-shirt championships, although one or two

looked as if they would have a good chance of winning.

'Get out, you kids,' said one of the large, tough ladies. 'Go on. Get out. Go home.'

A smaller and kindlier looking tough lady spoke up for us. 'Let 'em stay, Fay. They got a right. The more the merrier. But it could get rough, kids. Sure you shouldn't all be home?' She smiled. 'God, girls! It's Poppy's poppet!'

Mrs Poppy Gibson has a very wide circle of friends and acquaintances. Clearly we had met up with a few of them here. 'We're here for our rights, sister,' yelled Lavender.

'Yeah, sisters,' yelled Griller, growing excited by the minute, and treading on Squeaky, who squawked.

'Who's he?' the kinder one of the tough ladies asked Lavender. 'He's one of us. We're in this together. Us kids've got rights, too,' said Lavender.

'Like hell he is,' said the biggest of the sisters. It struck me that in some strange way they did all look the same, these women.

'I am so,' said Grill and because things were begining to hot up no one disagreed with him. Judging by the noise I guessed that a large part of the Wet T-shirt spectators were already inside, although they were still cramming them in and we had no shortage of onlookers.

'Down with the degradation of women!' yelled one sister.

'Down with all forms of sexist exploitation!' yelled another.

'Down with competitions like this crap!' yelled Lavender, getting right into it.

'You wouldn't make it past the first round, lady,' called a smaller spectator on his way in.

'Oh yeah?' yelled Griller and the spectator pushed his way through double quick, helped along by Grill's placard.

'Cool it, kid. Leave the action to us,' said the kindly sister to Griller.

'Go home to your wives and families – if they'll have you!' called the very tough sister.

'Cos we wouldn't have yer,' called Squeaky. 'No way.'

'Right on, sister!' yelled Griller.

'Just exactly what is a wet T-shirt competition, Tom?' asked Maggie. 'Wight on, sisters!' she yelled out loud, and then, 'Up yours!' to a rather unpleasant looking older man.

More people, mostly men, were now crowding in, and calling out not very nice words to the sisters and to us. 'Think, brothers! think before you leap!' I yelled out to a group, not quite knowing what I'd like them to think about, or where they were planning to leap. It's important to call out something on these occasions.

'What do these cows think they're doin' anyway? Look how they're usin' their poor little kids! Get out and get home, cows. Spoilin' our fun.'

I think that is what started the action riot. I'm not too sure, because my mind is all foggy about quite what happened and when. One minute we were just parading and saying things, and then there were banners and placards and sticks and bad, bad language flying everywhere. The biggest sister laid in all around her, and I saw her catch Griller a right wallop. That got him wound up and going in all directions. It could have been six, it could have been eight or it could have been twenty spectators who also got into it. Right there, right in the middle of the lot, and going under fast, was poor old Squeak.

'Get off me bloody mate, ape,' screamed Griller, and belted someone with his placard.

'Right on, sister!' screamed Lav and raised high her biggest and best placard, the 'Down With Lawful Prostitution' (spelled Porstitution) one that was painted bright red.

It was one giant rugby scrum and the sisters looked like they were winning and the noise was all around us, everywhere. So was the very bad language, and half of those on the inside were trying to get back outside to join in and were screaming, 'Let 'em have it!' 'Kick 'em where it hurts!', 'Get ya boot in!', 'Give it to 'em! Give it to 'em!' and the sisters were just as loud as the

spectators, and it did seem to me that they were the ones on top. On top, too, were Lav and Grill.

Like balls from a scrum us littler ones got spat out, real quick, and soon Squeaky, Bog, Maggie and I were just on-lookers. As usual, on the outside looking in.

'Down With Lawful Porstitution' was being used like a sledgehammer and there were truly horrible and awful noises, yells and screams coming from what the sledgehammer was hammering.

Then there were sirens. 'Geeeee . . . it's the cops,' yelled Bog, eyes very wide. 'Geeeee. . . '

It sure was. Four, five of them. Then they all joined in the fun, and the scrum packed down even tighter, and there were jeers, cheers and hoots from the pub. As always happens, even on the telly, the cops finally won the game.

The score was pretty even. Dragged off to the waiting cop van that had drawn up to provide the free transport, were four sisters, five spectators and one other who seemed to me to be nothing more than a passer-by. Dragged off, too, were Griller Spinks and Lavender Gibson.

A rather nice lady cop helped the 'Down With Lawful Porstitution' target to his feet. He looked real groggy, knocked about and half drunk and the 'Porstitution' bit of Lavender's placard seemed to be pinned somehow to his jacket. We've all met him before. He is indeed known to all of us. Who is he? Well, for want of a better word, it was . . . wait for it!! It was Carlos Gibson.

I won the race to the Poppy G. Boutique and Accessory Bar where the owner and prop., Mrs Poppy Gibson, was just locking the door after what she thought was gong to be a nice quiet Friday night.

'You gotta come! You gotta come! You gotta come!' I burst in, gasping.

'What? What-what?' I knew Mrs Poppy Gibson could see the alarm bells in my face.

'It's. . .' gasp, gasp.

Boggy took over. I think he was in better physical shape than me due to all his piano playing. 'It's Lav. She's been arrested. The cops've nicked her.'

I took it back from Bog. 'Even now they're likely interrogating her and we all know what that means,' I gulped. Visions passed in front of my eyes of electric light bulbs being forced into Lav's poor, brave face.

'What on earth are you talking about? If this is another of your pranks and little tricks. . . .'

'It's twue, Mrs Gibson. Lav has been arrested,' said Maggie. 'It . . . it's awful,' and she burst into tears. 'She's been taken to the jail and so's Gwiller.' Just a little squeak.

'Calm down and tell me all about it. Pass me my glass, Tom,' said Mrs Poppy Gibson.

What a woman! Not a spike of her hair out of place. Not the blink of so much as an eyelid at the fact that her daughter, Lavender, was even now being shut up for what was likely to be years for the near-murder of her only brother, Carlos Gibson. And that is of course the only ray of sunlight in a really dismal tale. Truly, the big pity about the whole thing was that she had stopped just this side of performing a wonderful act for humanity.

'Pour me another drink, rosebud,' Mrs Poppy Gibson said to Boggy, as she manfully hobbled to her chair and footstool, and sat down while we took turns in telling her the whole, lovely, gruesome story. 'Tom. Get me the phone. I'll ring your Mum. She should know what to do. After all, us taxpayers spent a fortune training her, and it's about time we got a little something in return. Now then, where on earth is Carlos?'

I told her as gently as I could.

CHAPTER EIGHT

In which Friday night gets paid for

My friend, Lavender Gibson. What a woman! What a superbly strong, fighting machine of a woman! Hero of the Battle of Greenhill Tavern! Not for the Lavender Gibsons of this world the cleaning out of dumb old wishing-wells. The Lavender Gibsons of our green and pleasant land take on whole suburbs, and emerge victorious.

Mum arrived, collected us all in double-quick time and dumped off Bog, Maggie and Squeak. The three of them were not too happy with the dumping. I got to go to the Greenhill Police Station, I think to identify Lav and Grill, or else to help with the still slowly-hobbling Mrs Poppy Gibson.

You've got to hand it to the cops. One sniff of a lawyer and away go the naked light bulbs and the long batons. They've sure got it down to a fine and cunning art.

'Couple of wild ones you've got here as clients, Shirley,' said an old cop to Mum. It was funny how he seemed to know her quite well. He also seemed to be having one big chuckle. Tricky, all right.

'You're telling me,' said Mum, with great feeling. 'What are the charges?'

'Haven't finished working them out yet, Shirl,' said the old cop. 'Likely to be Grievous Bodily Harm and Assault with a Deadly Weapon. Probably also Attempted Murder and Loitering with Intent.'

'Throwing the book time, eh Charlie?' said Mum.

'Plus Dropping Litter in a Public Place.'

Mum whistled. 'That too?'

Whew! You've got to hand it to them. When these guys do a thorough job, they sure do a thorough job. Didn't seem as though we were going to be seeing much of Lav and Grill for the next

ten years or possibly more. Of the sisters there was no sign at all. Quite likely they had already been processed, as they say, and were now awaiting trial. I hoped the cops had let each of them have their one free phone call.

'And your little rooster here, Shirl. Was he part of this sad business?' said the old cop.

'Me?' my mouth was dry and my voice was very high. 'Me? No sir. Not me, sir. I'm simply just a friend of the family and an innocent observer and bystander. Never seen 'em before in my life, sir. I'm sure I wasn't even there. What have they done?'

'Tell that to the birds and bunnies,' said the old cop.

Mr Spinks arrived. He seemed to know the cop, too, and it wasn't long before he, Mr Spinks that is, Mum, Mrs Poppy Gibson and the old cop were all sharing a laugh and having a nice hot cup of tea. Tricky. Tricky. It's all enough to make you shudder. Clearly this is the way it is done. The long arm of the law is truly the name of this game.

It is of great amazement to me just how little and thin is Mr Spinks. That such a tiny man could be the father of such a giant as Griller is one of life's great mysteries. It is quite likely that having such a small father is why Grill is so friendly with Squeaky. I think he sees in Squeaky Simpson a sort of father-figure. I must talk to him about this some time.

A very nice young lady cop broke up the party by bringing in Lav and Grill. Both of them had torn clothes and looked a bit bruised and battered. Lav had quite a nasty cut on her cheek and chin. It's not for me to say where or how these injuries were sustained. Greenhill Tavern? Interrogation? Who knows?

It's probably not amazing to those of you who know the finer workings of the law, just how tortuous the whole thing can seem to someone as innocent as me. Lav and Grill were released, as the old cop said, into the custody of their parents, who, he expected, would take whatever action they saw fit. Wink, wink. All outstanding charges were dropped. Quite disappointing, really.

Ten years of prison visiting just could've opened up many new doors and avenues for me and for Boggy and Maggie. Still, it all shows what a good lawyer can do, and where would we be without one? It's a comfort at times like this to have one in the family.

Mrs Poppy Gibson gave her daughter a very big hug and kiss and said, 'I'm proud of you, kid, but that's not going to stop me getting a very full weekend of housework out of you, and just wait till I take my hands and crutch to your brother. I'll enjoy finishing off what you started. Wet T-shirt show, eh? Little slob!'

Every cloud truly, truly, truly has a solid gold lining. I must visit the Gibson home very, very often over the weekend.

Mr Spinks didn't quite give his son, Griller, a hug and a kiss, because that would have been physically impossible. He said, 'Not only your old friend Mrs Mumford gonna get some gardening this weekend, eh Dwayne?'

'Yes, Daddy.' Oh, Griller Spinks, what have they done to you in here?

'I'll lend you my one, Albert, to give him a hand if you like. That's after he's done our lawns, de-cobwebbed the house and scrubbed all the oil stains off the drive.' My mother.

A little bird whispered that I was unlikely to be visiting the Gibson house to enjoy the sight of Carlos being done by *his* mother.

Talk about the long arm of the law! Prison and interrogation would have been ten times, a hundred times more comfortable than what we suffered over that long, long weekend, at the long, long arms of our families! Scarcely time to breathe, and no time to eat. No more, no less than a team of slave labourers, we became. The sadistic cruelty surprised even me. Were we really being made to suffer this way at the hands of so-called civilised parents?

It wasn't until late Sunday afternoon that we were released, exhausted, not capable of any more work, to meet quietly and sadly and exchange news of our imprisonment.

By this time our house was free of all cobwebs. I hope the spiders knew how lucky they were to be tossed out of our home. At least they were escaping. No oil stains showed on any portion of our concrete, and the lawns were mown. I had dug eleven new torture holes for shrubs and trees where Mum had stuck wee markers. The punishment, you see, was to be never-ending.

Lavender Gibson had springcleaned the Gibson home, cooked all meals, mowed lawns – and oh, how grass does grow green and thick in this suburb of ours – done three loads of laundry, taken the cat to the vet and changed the dressings on Carlos's wounds. If it had been me I would've stuck a plaster on the cat's paw and put Carlos in the cat-box and taken *him* to the vet.

Griller Spinks had dug dirt for Daddy for the whole weekend. Boggy Lupescu had also mown lawns and had made seven trips to the dump with his father carting old cut-off branches from trees. Exactly the opposite from us. The Lupescus yank 'em out and the Colmans plonk 'em in. Talk about an upside-down world!

Maggie Smith, whose parents had gone away for the weekend, had been hired out to her aunt-in-law, Ms Hennessey (Mrs Smith). Now if you have some idea that our dear Ms Hennessey is your young and trendy teaching person, in full tune with our ways of life and thinking, then I've put you wrong. She's actually just the same and exactly as bad as all the rest. To put it as politely as possible, Maggie Smith slogged her poor guts out.

Squeaky Simpson? No one knows. And the poor wee thing is so small that the hard labour has probably damaged him for good and all.

We survived. How? Well, as Lavender Gibson put it in that straight-from-the-shoulder way of hers, 'Strength of character, sisters!'

We were all in the front room of the Hennessey-Smith granny-flat. Late afternoon. Sunday. Ms Hennessey and Alf had gone out, and Maggie invited us in for a cup of tea and slices of cake. 'I must know, Lav, just for the record,' I said. 'What did the cops really

do to you?’

‘Don’t ask, Tom-tit. We’re trying to forget the horror of it all, aren’t we Grill?’ Lav threw up her hands.

‘Wha?’

So it had been bad. I knew. I just knew. I’m seldom wrong about these things. ‘Come on, tell us.’

Lavender sighed. ‘If you must know, Tommy. If you must know. You just remember that it hurts me to talk of it, but for your sake I’ll try,’ she sighed again. ‘We were taken, separately of course, to these little rooms for questioning. Went on for hours. Hours!’

‘Was only about half an hour between the battle and us getting you out,’ I said.

‘D’you want to know or don’t you?’ Sharply.

‘Yep,’ I shut up.

‘The screams.’ She rubbed her eyes. ‘I don’t think I’ll ever forget the screams. They haunt me. They’ll haunt me forever. I think it was the sisters being tortured.’

‘Whew!’

‘Either that or the sisters were still having a go at those spectators who got arrested with us. Does it matter? Either way it was dreadful. A dreadful horror. I’ll never forget it till the day I die.’

‘Yeah. You’ve said that once, Lav.’ I said.

‘Then the questioning. On and on. It seemed like a lifetime. It *was* a lifetime. The same questions over and over, just trying, as they do of course, to trick you, to trip you up. . . .’

I knew. I just knew. How right I’d been.

‘It wasn’t like that at. . . .’ Griller Spinks.

‘Shut up, Griller,’ said Lav. ‘I wondered if I had reached the end of my string, as they say, and then they brought in the water and rubber hoses.’

‘What did they bring in the water for, Lav,’ I breathed hard.

‘To give ’er a drink,’ suggested Boggy.

Lav shook her head. ‘I’ll never know, Tom-tit. I’ll just never know. Oh, the horrors,’ she shuddered softly, in that way she has

that I find quite exciting.

'I never got no water,' said Grill. 'I just sat. . . .'

'I'll never know,' Lav continued right over Grill. 'Because that's when your mother, my dear Aunty Shirley, arrived to save us. Oh God, how that changed them. How it changed everything,' she clicked her fingers. 'Just like that,' click, click.

'I don't think. . . .' Grill started again.

'No, my dear Dwayne. You don't,' said Lav. 'You never do and that's your big trouble.'

There we have it. Just as bad as I knew it had been. A nightmare indeed. And so very, very much the same as Grill's experience at the gang house. Interesting.

Lavender Gibson. What a woman! Protester and patriot. As I always say, give the Lavender Gibsons of this world a bit between the teeth and they sure make a mouthful out of it.

Not that it was quite the end, of course. Kindly old Mr Harvey, Principal of Greenhill Intermediate School, spoke at a special Monday assembly of the whole school.

'While I am very, very pleased at the progress being made towards the community service awards and can say, without fear of being contradicted, that the quality of service is very fine indeed, I am, boys and girls, making one or two changes to the ground rules.'

From now on we had to write down an outline of what we were going to do, sign it, get it signed by our parents, get it signed by our teachers, and then get it signed yet again by Mr Harvey. What a drag. What a quite, quite typical educational thing to do.

The arrest and imprisonment of Lavender Gibson and Griller Spinks was, naturally, the big, big news of the day. The unkind opinion of some, and one which I did not share, was that the cops had made a serious mistake in not locking the two of them up together and throwing away the key. To others, well just a few, and I am among this number, they were great heroes.

As you can well imagine, Cloris Brown was in the first lot. 'They

should never have been let out, Tom-Tom,' she said. 'They are a menace on our streets and none of us is safe.'

'How dare you say that, Cloris Brown,' I said. 'Lav and Grill are my very good friends and they, we, I mean, really fought for the things we believe in. And don't you call me Tom-Tom.'

'I didn't mean. . . .'

'Yes you did, Cloris Brown. And you can stop biking round our street. We can do without your sort biking in our street.'

'I can bike anywhere I like,' said Cloris.

'Well, don't look at our house then,' I said.

'Who wants to look at your house anyway?' said Cloris. 'The lawns don't ever get mowed and it needs painting.'

The end of a beautiful friendship? Who knows? All I know is where my true allies are. My friends. I might have been tempted down that slippery path called Cloris Brown. After all, I am only human. How splendid, though, that I stopped in time, turned and looked back to who was standing there with a sad look in her old eye. Who was it? It was my very good and true friend, Lavender Gibson.

CHAPTER NINE

In which the drama thickens

Excitement is building. I can feel it in my bones. It's like a drug, an addiction, this drama business. It gets to you. It doesn't take too long to turn you into an addict. I doubt that my life will ever be the same again. I have a great feeling I have found my place, my role in life.

I would like a part in a long-running telly series. Not too much violence, of course. Just enough to give it a bit of spice and interest for your general telly viewer. Not too many lines to learn, because that's one big drag, but not so few that the audience, my audience, would forget me from one week to the next. Mind you, if they pay you for the number of lines you speak, I suppose I could manage quite a few.

'What d'you reckon I could get, Dad?' I asked him.

'I think the world's your oyster, Tom,' said Dad. 'Probably no limit to what you could get.'

'I think you could play the part of a dog quite well,' said Sue. 'Except you're a bit small and not hairy enough.'

'Try being nice to your brother for a change, Sue,' said Mum.

'Aw, Mum. You know I'm always kind to dumb animals,' said Sue. 'Specially dogs.'

'Have you got dirty ears, Sue?' I asked, very sweetly.

'Of course not, stupid little idiot,' said Sue.

'I was just wondering why else you'd be bothering to get Carlos to clean them out with his tongue,' I said.

Sue went very red indeed, very quick. 'Have you been spying on me again, you filthy little brute?'

Then we had one of our typical family arguments.

Yes, indeed. A life on the stage or the small screen is the life for me. Would beat working any time, or lawn mowing.

Cloris Brown (as the Reader): Meanwhile, back in the palace, Her Majesty discovers all is far from well.

Lavender Gibson (as the Wicked Queen):

Mirror! Mirror! Come hither.

Tom Colman (as the mirror, enters): What now?

*Lavender Gibson: Shine your light on me, oh Mirror of mine,
I've rid myself of that ugly wretch just fine.*

Oh shimmer, oh shine on my beauty divine,

Now! Tell me if I'm not right?

Tom Colman: You're not right.

Lavender Gibson: How come? How come? Don't trick me, you feeble creature. You've seen for yourself I've quite a way with those who annoy me.

Tom Colman: Whatever you say. (Sighs.) Whatever you say.

Lavender Gibson: Oh silvered mirror on the wall,

Pray tell who's fairest dame of all?

*Tom Colman: The hearts of the apes you sent with Snow White
Were not quite made of stone.*

They abandoned her in the forest wild

And she's still a threat to your throne.

Lavender Gibson (very, very agitated):

What? What? What did you say? Do my ears deceive me?

Tom Colman: You heard.

Snow White's beauty, true and rare,

Lives on in the depths of the forest drear.

She's found herself a band of dwarfs

And they and her have a lot of laughs.

'Ms Hennessey! Ms Hennessey!'

'What is it this time, Lavender Gibson?'

'It's my opinion, Ms Hennessey, that this part of the play really drags. I've checked it out with lots of others and they all agree,' said Lavender.

'Do they Lavender? I'm sure you'll tell me why. Indeed I know

you'll tell me why and I can't wait,' Ms Hennessey came up to the front of the stage.

'It's the Mirror, Ms Hennessey.'

'The Mirror, Lavender?'

'He unbalances my part, Ms Hennessey.'

'I can't see how, Lavender.'

'He's got too many lines and I haven't got enough. Do you think it would be a good idea if I re-wrote this bit, Ms Hennessey?'

'No, Lavender. I don't think that would be a good idea at all.'

'Neither do I,' I said.

'Shut up, Tom,' said Ms Hennessey. 'No one asked you.' Somewhat of a lousy thing for her to say. I was sticking up for her play after all. 'But she's. . .' I began.

'Shut up, Tom,' said Ms Hennessey, and then turned back to Lavender. 'Get on with it, Lavender, will you?' she said, very quietly, and sort of controlled. 'Will we never reach the end of this wretched thing? Cue her in, Tom.'

Tom Colman: She's found herself a band of dwarfs

And they and her have a lot of laughs.

Lavender Gibson: Foiled again! Oh, woe is me. Foiled again!

And she's still got her beauty?

Tom Colman: Indubitably. Indomitably. Indisputably.

In other words, more than ever.

'There you are, Ms Hennessey. Exactly what I was saying. He gets all those words there and they don't mean a thing. Not nothing, Ms Hennessey. The audience won't be interested in him. Why should they be? He's only a stupid mirror. The audience are interested in the Wicked Queen,' said Lavender Gibson.

Ms Hennessey was even quieter than she had been just a couple of minutes before. 'Firstly, there is unlikely to be any audience at the rate we are going, Lavender Gibson. Secondly, you, yourself, are increasingly unlikely personally to have any audience whatsoever. Just one more word out of you, Lavender Gibson,

and I'll give Cloris. . . .'

'I'll do it! I'll do it! I'll do it!' Cloris Brown sprang up from her stool at the side of the stage. 'I'll do it, Ms Hennessey. I'll be the Wicked Queen! You can even take some of the lines back, Ms Hennessey. I'll do it!'

'Sit down, Cloris, dear. Lavender is just about to have her very, very last chance,' said Ms Hennessey.

'You give Lavender Gibson too many. . . .'

'SIT DOWN!!!'

Tom Colman: Indubitably. Indomitably. Indisputably.

In other words, more than ever.

Lavender Gibson: Well, why didn't you say so in the first place? Oh, what shall I do? Oh, what shall I do?

Cloris Brown: The Wicked Queen pondered for a while and then came up with a bright idea. Disguising herself as a haggard crone, she took a basket of poisoned apples and set off into the forest. At last she came to the clearing. Who should she spy but the sweet Snow White frisking among the trees and flowers.

Maggie Smith (as Snow White. She frisks about the stage and plucks a few flowers from the branches of the trees.)

Oh trees, Oh flowers, dear friends of mine. This life of nature is suiting me fine, although I must admit it gets a bit boring at times.

Lavender Gibson (The Wicked Queen, disguised as an old, haggard, crone, pushes her way through the forest and enters the clearing.)

Aha, my dear. (Uses very croaky voice.)

Snow White (startled): Oh! Who are you?

Lavender Gibson: A friend, my darling one. Just a little old lady of the forest, and a close acquaintance of the nineteen dwarfs.

Maggie Smith: Funny, I've never heard them mention you.

Lavender Gibson: Naughty old boys. They call me Aunty Minny. I live down there in that little forest spinney.

Maggie Smith: Well, I'm sorry, Aunty Minny, but they're not at home.

They are off doing good deeds on the other side of the forest.

Lavender Gibson: Oh, silly old me. I should have known. But, no matter, my little pudding. I've brought them a basket of fruit. Dear wee fellows, they love their apples. And I've brought one for you, too, my sweet little dumpling. Plucked fresh from the bough of my special, special apple tree. Do sink those pearly molars of yours into its crisp flesh and see what it does for you.

Maggie Smith: Sweet Auntie Minny, you shouldn't have bothered.

Lavender Gibson: I know, my little peachy-poops, but generosity has always been the greatest sin of this old body. (Holds out apple.) Here. Take a teensy, weensy bite.

Maggie Smith: Oh thank you, Auntie Minny. (Takes apple and peers at Wicked Queen.) Do you know, just for a moment I could swear I had seen you somewhere before.

Lavender Gibson (jumps back slightly and pulls cloak closer): I don't think so, my wee carrot top. A trick of light, no more. Maybe the dear boys have a photo of me somewhere on their dresser. Now, my dear, take that bite. The apple, my child. Eat up, and then I shall let you have another. Eat up, my sweet. Eat up. Eat up. Eat ... eat ... eat ...

Cloris Brown: And so, Snow White eats of the pure, white and deadly flesh. Within seconds, as the Wicked Queen chortles in evil glee, she falls into a deep and death-like coma. (The Wicked Queen, chortling and chuckling evilly, makes her way back through the forest.)

'Whew!' said Ms Hennessey. 'I never thought we'd make it. Same time, same place tomorrow, pets. I'm off.'

The plaster came off Mrs Poppy Gibson's sprained ankle. She still limped, and she helped herself along with a nicely carved walking stick. Her injury and Eugene's quick vacation back in the U.S. of A. meant that our looked-forward-to skiing holiday up on the slopes flew out the window. Also, Mrs Poppy Gibson had decided to retire from skiing. 'It's just that, very occasionally, one can have

too much of a good thing,' she said.

Because drama was now the big thing, no one was too disappointed. Mum, Mrs Poppy Gibson, Mrs Lupescu and Mrs Smith (not Ms Hennessey but her sister-in-law and mother of Maggie Smith) were doing the costumes. I think they got the job because it was their kids who were the stars of the show and no one else could be bothered helping anyway.

Kindly old Mr Harvey and Mr Alf Smith and one or two others were doing the scenery. There wasn't much of it. Just a few bits and pieces of furniture like the pink dressing-table and, of course, the roll-on, roll-off dwarf house. There was to be a backdrop, too, of ferns and flowers and trees. If Ms Hennessey didn't want to use our school hall I'm sure Mum and Dad would let her have our garden.

Mr Spinks, Bert, father of Griller, turned out to be a true gem, and an electrician. He got to work sorting out coloured lights, spot lights and some pretty weird sound effects, like wolf-howls, for the forest scenes. It was sure going to be quite a show, even if it still took hours to get the nineteen dwarfs on and off the stage. Alf had worked wonders with them and they now did daily training laps of the hall on their knees in an effort to speed things up. 'Come on, youse lot. Toddle, toddle, toddle. D'ya hear me?'

The costumes were something else again. Mrs Poppy Gibson had one of her old wedding frocks dyed purple for her daughter, Lavender, to wear. On top of the purple she added a whole lot of other bits and pieces. It was magnificent and it was enormous. When Lav and Grill got on stage together it was clear there wouldn't be room for anyone else. Lavender flowed colourfully in all directions.

I have never been more embarrassed than when I tried on my costume and everyone laughed. 'You're the cutest little thing, Tommy,' said Mrs Poppy Gibson. 'I could just hug you.' She said this in front of just about everyone. Having said it, she did it!

Not even my Mum supported me. 'Be careful, Flo. You're likely

to lose him in there!

It was truly ghastly. A little black waistcoat and white, frilly blouse, and a thing like a baby's bib with lace sewn on it to tie round my neck. Tight, tight, tight black tights that I just knew would give me a hernia and also restrict my natural growth, as well as my movement. Oh! The embarrassment. And the tights revealed just about everything. Absolutely everything. All those 'other parts belonging to a man' that W. Shakespeare told us about in *Romeo and Juliet*. Now, as yet my 'other parts' may not amount to all that much, but that's no reason to be bundling them up and showing them off in very tight tights.

They all looked. You could see them looking. All of them. You could see just where they were looking. Oh, what we artists must bear for the sake of our art!

The *Greenhill Gazette* came and took a photo at a rehearsal and there was me, tights, other parts and all, splashed across the front page yet again. Twice in a month.

Griller got a real good leather jacket from one of his cousins at the gang house. It had patches and studs and writing all over the back of it. He was going to wear it over nothing at all, and he reckoned that both he and Squeaky were off to town one afternoon to get their chests tattooed. Grill had collected seven bicycle chains, and judging by the list of lost and found things we have read out at assembly, I think I know where he had got most of them from.

Griller's close friendship with old Mrs Mumford was growing. This was not surprising because it seemed to me that all they ever did was drink cups of tea and eat cakes while poor old Squeaks did the community service. When Squeaky was sick I went with Griller to give him a hand. Give him a hand? Do all the work, more like.

'I know I gotta go on goin',' said Grill. 'Can't not go now. Not for ever, I reckon.'

Seemed it was going to be one long friendship. 'Well, it won't

go on for ever, will it Grill?' I said, sensibly. 'Well, it couldn't. Your forever and old Mrs Mumford's forever are two different things.'

'Whaddya mean?'

'Well, look at it. Old Mrs Mumford's no chicken.'

'Nah. She's an old lady.'

'That's what I mean. She must be just about a hundred,' I said.

'Nah. She's eighty-four. She told me. Both our birthdays is in August. We was born under the same star, she says.'

'Well, there you are. She won't last that much longer. Reckon she could die soon, Grill.' I shouldn't have said it. If Grill had spotted a handy coathook he would've hung me on it. As it was, it took me quite a long time to get up off the ground.

'Don' you say that again. Eh? Eh?'

'It's O.K. Grill.' I dusted myself off. 'She'll live at least to a hundred.' Then, to be on the safe side, 'Probably about a hundred and ten, if you ask me.'

I did old Mrs Mumford's shopping while Grill hung out her washing, and when I got back they were sitting in front of her roaring fire drinking tea. Even though the sun outside was bright and warm she'd shut the curtains. It sure was hot. Quite likely she didn't want the neighbours to know that someone like Grill was visiting her.

'Where's your other little boy, Dwayne? Where's he gone today?' asked old Mrs Mumford.

'He's sick, Auntie,' said Grill. 'Brought this one instead, eh? He's all right, too. His name's Tom. He's me mate.'

Auntie? Were they related? Was there something I didn't know?

'He's a nice little fellow, isn't he?' And they sat talking about me as if I wasn't there, or was just some sort of object.

'He's just like my little brother, Ernie. Little Ernie. He's gone now, bless him,' said old Mrs Mumford.

'Where's he gone, Auntie?' asked Griller.

'Heaven, I expect,' said old Mrs Mumford. Then she got right

into a very long and complicated story that took place when she was ten and Ernie was three and someone called Victor was eleven. Victor, it turned out, was another brother. Indeed old Mrs Mumford quite clearly had once had very many brothers and sisters. She and Victor took little Ernie right out into the middle of a swamp and left him there to get sucked up in the mud and drown. When their Mum found out she took to them with a broom just like a witch's broom and belted them from the house to the swamp and back again three times and the cows never got milked that day. I don't know about Ernie and whether it was drowning in the swamp that sent him off to heaven or whether he lived somewhat longer. I don't know about the cows, either, or why they were in the story at all. I don't know why they got belted three times and I never found out if Ernie got rescued before the belting, after the belting, or at all.

'She's nice, eh?' said Grill, when we finally got away. 'Real nice. Just like my grandma.'

She was nothing like mine. One of mine always wore jeans. Old Mrs Mumford was just about old enough to be the mother of both my grandmas. 'Why d'you call her Auntie, Grill?'

'She told me to,' said Grill. 'You come tomorrer, too, eh? If Squeaky's still sick, you come. She needs some firewood choppin', does old Mrs Mumford.'

'I think the truly elderly keep themselves too hot, Grill,' I said. 'She'd be much better off without that fire.'

'If Auntie wants a fire and wood to chop, then we'll do it, eh?' We? I didn't feel too hopeful.

'You know, it's funny, Tom. It is, eh?' said Griller.

There didn't seem anything at all funny about chopping firewood. Not from where I stood. 'What's funny?'

'You know that story? You know that story about 'er and Ernie and that other one, that Victor? About the swamp and the witch's broom?'

'Yeah. So what?'

'Well,' Griller seemed stuck on the words. 'Like old Mrs Mumford can go on and on and on, eh? Like she's got it all there, eh? Right down to what they were wearing and how the cows never got their milk. Old Mrs Mumford remembers the lot, eh?'

'Yeah. So?'

'That's right back. When she was just a little kid. . . .'

'Seventy-four years ago,' I said. 'Older'n you and me and Lav, Maggie, Boggy and Squeak all put together.'

'She remembers all that. Every day I go I get all that, and all those other stories about Ernie and their Vi and Daisy. Yet, you know what?'

'What?'

'She can remember all that and she can't remember what she done yesterday or even in the morning. Sure queer, eh? Can't remember what day it is. All that stuff.'

'It's one of life's mysteries, Grill,' I said. 'A great big mystery. Anyway, she likes you a lot and I reckon that's good.'

'I like her, too,' said Griller Spinks. 'Even if she 'as no dog for walks, and sometimes she calls me Ernie.'

CHAPTER TEN

In which there are some ups (e.g., drama) and some downs (e.g., Carlos Gibson)

What do you do if you are struck dumb by stage fright and your mouth opens and shuts like a fish and nothing comes out, not even bubbles?

What do you do if your pants fall down?

What do you do if you turn to say your bit and the person you say it to isn't there and has gone or has not come?

What do you do if you want to go to the loo?

What do you do if a spot light falls on your head?

What do you do if no matter how hard you learn some lines they just won't stick?

What do you do to get a bigger voice?

Acting is a very stressful profession, very many times harder than community service, and almost as bad as mowing lawns. Opening night is far too close around a very near corner.

Cloris Brown (as the Reader): And so, Snow White eats of the pure, white and deadly flesh and, within seconds, as the Wicked Queen chortles in evil glee, she falls into a deep and death-like coma. . . (The Wicked Queen, chortling and chuckling evilly makes her way back through the forest.)

Back through the forest goes the Wicked Queen, laughing all the way and the dwarfs return to find their loved one unconscious.

Dwarf No. 1: Oh, what has happened to Snow White?

Dwarf No. 2: Oh, what has struck our ray of light?

Dwarf No. 3: The Wicked Queen, that fat old witch

Dwarf No. 4: Has done her tricks

Dwarf No. 5: And queered our pitch.

Dwarf No. 6: Our angel white

Dwarf No. 7: *Has taken flight*
 Dwarf No. 8: *And flown halfway to heaven.*
 Dwarf No. 9: *It wouldn't have happened*
 Dwarf No. 10: *If we'd been quick*
 Dwarf No. 11: *And got back home by seven.*
 Dwarf No. 12: *Us wretched dwarfs*
 Dwarf No. 13: *Have let her down,*
 Dwarf No. 14: *We weren't here for protection.*
 Dwarf No. 15: *Just one bite of a Granny Smith,*
 Dwarf No. 16: *Poisoned beyond detection.*
 Dwarf No. 17: *There's nothing much we now can do,*
 Dwarf No. 18: *We need a cure that's drastic.*
 Dwarf No. 19: *Let's wrap her up and let her stew*
 In a sheet of snow-white plastic.
 (Dwarfs Nos. 1-4 bring out a sheet of plastic and wrap Snow White into a nice neat parcel.)
 Cloris Brown: *Gently, with infinite care, patience and loving kindness, they wrap the mortal remains of the sweet creature. And then – by borrowing a page from another story and in order to get to the end of this one a bit quicker – they all sit in a circle round her and go to sleep.*
 (Dwarfs all fall asleep at once. No snoring and no movement whatsoever.)
 One day, who should enter the wood but a handsome prince on a hunting expedition. . . .
 (Enter Handsome Prince. Carries bow and arrow. Takes aim and fires arrow out over heads of audience.)
 Bogdan Lupescu (as the Handsome Prince):
 Oh golly! Missed again. (Tries again.)
 Oh darn! Just not my day.
 Oh birds of the forests and beasts of the wood,
 Please have no fear 'cos my aim is no good.

This is one real, real laugh. Bog as a handsome prince? Bog as a

handsome anything? Griller Spinks, even with a tattooed chest, could do this part better than poor old Bog. I know dear Ms Hennessey says we must suspend our beliefs, but this, to my mind, is suspending belief just one bit too far. There must be a limit to how much you can expect an audience to squint their eyes up, that is if they're going to get to see anything at all. Poor Bog might be a piano player of great ability, but he's sure not cut out to play a handsome hero in a play on a stage. Poor old Boggy, I must be honest with him for his own sake. I'll tell him just how bad he does it, and then we'll spy on Carlos and Sue together.

Bogdan Lupescu (spots Snow White and the dwarfs, all asleep. Examines them):

Aha! What do we have here? Why, it's a large number of dwarfs sleeping in a circle around a beautiful, enplasticated lady. Now, my guess is as good as anyone's but in stories like this, one kiss from the hero – and I am the hero – (flexes muscles) generally sets things right. But wait. Young as I am, do I really wish to be encumbered? Nothing is more sure – wake up a damsel in distress and it's up the aisle before you can say good fairy.

(Takes very close look at Snow White.)

Yes (slowly). Yes, I think so. She'll be right.

(Kisses Snow White.)

If only they all knew this is truly heart-in-the-mouth time. I held my breath and crossed all my fingers that he'd leave it at just a kiss. I must remember to check Maggie's neck later to see if there are any little holes. I will also suggest to her, as nicely as I can, that it might be a good idea for her to pop a bit of garlic down her front before rehearsals.

(Snow White slowly awakens, rises, stretches, scratches head etc.)

Maggie Smith: Why? Who are you?

Bogdan Lupescu: I am a Handsome Prince and I've rescued you.

Maggie Smith (Snow White swoons): Oh, my prince. (Falls into his

arms.)

Bogdan Lupescu: That's quite enough of that for the time being. Who are you?

Maggie Smith: I am the Princess Snow White and I am delicious.

Bogdan Lupescu: I've found her! I've found her! I've found her! Every handsome prince from north, south, east and west has searched long and hard for you.

Maggie Smith: Dear Handsome Prince, you have saved me from the evil toils of the Wicked Queen. Good dwarfs, awake! We have been saved.

(The dwarfs wake up. There is much shuffling, snoring and scratching and rubbing of eyes.)

Oh dear little dwarfs, with legs so short,

The Handsome Prince has rescued me and will give you a fat reward.

Bogdan Lupescu: Hey, hold on. No one said anything to me about a fat. . . .

All Dwarfs: Hurray! Hurray! Hurray!

Bogdan Lupescu: Let us to the place to face the Wicked Queen!

All Dwarfs: Hurray! Hurray! Hurray!

(The Handsome Prince leads Snow White and the Dwarfs into the forest. As the last dwarfs push their way through, the trees join in with the whole group and exit, stage right.)

The horror to end all horrors! Carlos Gibson is going to be a teacher. He's been taken on by the place that trains them and has been sent to our school for a week to see how it's done. That's a laugh all by itself. Of all the teachers at Greenhill Intermediate School there's only our dear Ms Hennessey, Miss Webster – the rather elderly and somewhat boring but nice class teacher to Lav, Maggie, Boggy and me – and probably kindly old Mr Harvey, who deserve the name teacher. The rest? Well, as they say, and we've done it in science, water finds its own level, and most of the teachers we've got are lower than the level of the water that

lies on our playing fields for the best part of the year.

Carlos Gibson a teacher! And they've given him to Miss Webster to 'show him the ropes' as they say. Carlos Gibson sure doesn't need showing any rope. I've still got a mark on my throat from where he tried to hang me with one about five years ago, when I was very, very small. He told me it wouldn't hurt me very much to jump out of our apple tree – wearing it round my neck.

Every bone in my body, every muscle, could sing a fine poem about the great cruelty, over many years, that I have suffered at the hands, elbows, knees and feet of Carlos Gibson. I could not begin to tell the tales I truly should tell. That the authorities who look after education in this green and pleasant land of ours are so blind as to put this unfeeling monster in front of a class of innocent young beings makes my blood both curdle and boil. The mind boggles. It's enough to make you spew!

I must do my bit to prevent this great tragedy before it's too late. It's no use expecting any help from his sister, Lavender Gibson. She may well enjoy battering him into the ground outside the Greenhill Tavern and Bottlestore, but sniff the smell of power that having a brother as a teacher brings to her and it's all, 'Mr Gibson, sir. Is this right?' and 'Mr Gibson, sir, could you just advise me on this problem?' as Carlos prances around our classroom pretending he is a teacher already.

A visit to kindly old Mr Harvey is called for. As he always says, 'My door is always open to my pupils.' As usual I find it shut so I knock and wait.

'Haven't seen you for quite a while, John,' says Mr Harvey. 'Drama keeping you busy these days?'

'Tom,' I say. Mr Harvey has the greatest difficulty remembering my name.

'If you say so,' he says. 'Now then, lad, what can I do for you?'

If I had hoped for an ally in my fight to prevent the evil fungus of Carlos Gibson sucking life's juices from the young of this country, I am sadly mistaken.

'A fine young man indeed,' says Mr Harvey, before I hardly get started. 'A real credit to his dear mother. It's not easy you know, Don, for a solo parent in our society today. It seems to me that Mrs Gibson has done a splendid job with young Carlos, and even with Lavender. Remarkable girl, that. Yes, that lad's a credit to his family, and a credit, I feel sure, he will be to our profession. Fine, fine rugby player is young Gibson. I still remember that try. . . . He will go far. Somewhat surprised that a young man of his attributes and abilities chose teaching as a career. World's his oyster, I would say, and the money market, or whatever fool thing they call it, the law, even, would have seemed more his cup of tea. We're fortunate, indeed, to get him. It's inspiring that a young man of his type has chosen to serve. To give rather than to take.'

'But, Mr Harvey, he's . . . Carlos is. . . .'

'An excellent example for you all. For all you young lads, Tom. Just what you need, someone like that up in front of you. Of course, I forget, he is something like an older brother to you, isn't he. . . .?'

'I really don't think. . . .'

'Reminds me of myself when I was his age. Back when I started out,' Mr Harvey sighs. 'Getting a bit hard to remember back now, boy.' Chuckle. 'Top drawer. He's top drawer is Carlos Gibson. Top drawer material, indeed.'

'But Carlos. . . .'

'Well, Don. It's good of you to find the time these days to come in here and put in a good word for someone like young Carlos. Nice thought. No more, of course, than I've come to expect of you. I'll certainly let him know you dropped by and spoke up for him,' Mr Harvey gives me a big smile. 'Can't wait to see this play of our Miss Hennessey's. She tells me you're doing a remarkable job. Can't wait to see you. Playing the part of the king, right? As I say, no less than I expect to hear of you, Don. Close the door on the way out, boy.'

Old Harvey, brainwashed!

No help, either, from Mum. She simply confirmed for me what I already knew – that Carlos Gibson was the son Mum and Dad wished they'd had.

'Well, I do admit to being a little surprised,' said Mum. 'And Flo's over the moon. She says that not only is Carlos the first one ever in her family to stay on at school past the age of thirteen, but now he's sure to end up running his own school.'

'I don't know why they don't give him old Harvey's job tomorrow, and be done with it,' I said.

'Don't be silly, dear,' said Mum. 'He'll have to have some training.' She smiled. 'When I think of it, Carlos has always been so good with little kids. Even when you were little more than a baby I didn't have the slightest hesitation leaving you with Carlos. He was such a funny little boy. He used to plead with me to be allowed to look after you.'

My poor bones cried out just how well he'd looked after me! 'Yeah. You never knew what he was doing to me. You just never knew.'

'Nonsense, dear. He was simply doing the best he could. You were always such an active little demon for anyone to look after. I'll never forget the time poor Carlos had to save you from hanging yourself. He was just in time, too.'

'He smokes,' I said, gloomily.

'I'm sure he doesn't, dear. Well, not very much, anyway. It seems a confidence thing with boys of his age. I'm sure he'll grow out of it,' said Mum.

'I hope not,' I said.

'One thing I will say for Carlos is that he's never really lacked confidence. Able boy and so helpful. You certainly could learn a thing or two from him, young man.'

'Yeah,' I said, very bitterly. 'Like how to torture smaller and weaker things and make sure no one ever finds out about it. Do you want to know why Lavender's survived all these years?'

Mum smiled. 'Tell me if you must.'

'Because she's bigger'n him. What's why.'

'That's silly, dear, and you know it. Those two get on like a house on fire. They always have. Just like you and Sue,' said Mum. 'So close.'

Blind! Blind!!

'And talking of a house on fire, Auntie Flo's giving a barbecue. It's a sort of combined welcome home for Eugene and a celebration of Carlos's being accepted for Teachers College. She's holding it here because she says we've got a bigger garden and backyard,' Mum sighed. 'However, I think the real reason is, love her as I do, that she knows your father and I will do all the work.'

'Sure. Like mother like son,' even more gloomily.

'I've seldom noticed you over-working yourself,' she said.

It was my turn to sigh. Typical. 'It wasn't us I was talking about. I suppose you'll be telling me next that it's also a surprise engagement party for Carlos and Sue.'

'That certainly would be a surprise, dear,' said Mum. 'I think it's a bit soon for that. Still, it wouldn't surprise me too much if it wasn't all that far round the corner.'

The true horror of this happening had already struck me many times. 'Yeah, and I know what that would mean. Do you realise, Mum, that I'd be the uncle of Carlos Gibson's children?'

'Yes, dear. And I'd be the grandma. Now, let's both stop talking such silly nonsense. You can make a cup of coffee and call your father in, too. As you well know, he's mowing all those strips of lawn you missed last Saturday. He reckons you miss more than you mow.'

CHAPTER ELEVEN

In which we get all fired up

Ms Hennessey has said she's done just about all she can do with the play. The rest is up to us.

'What a cop out,' said Lavender. 'It's her play, and she's the one who hasn't written it right, and put the wrong people in just about half the parts. I would never have given Cloris Brown any part at all. Maybe as a tree, but even that'd be stretching it.'

'What makes you think you're so gweat, Lavender Gibson?' asked Maggie.

'I'm a natural,' said Lav.

'A natural what?' asked Boggy.

'A natural big-head,' said Maggie.

Nerves. They're getting to us. It's nail-biting time and already mine are down to my elbows. A great sense of excitement scents the very air we breathe. Mind you, the air we breathe in the hall is so full of dust it gives you hay-fever, and the smell of the dwarfs' socks is enough to make you puke.

Cloris Brown (as the Reader): Meanwhile, back at the palace, the aging dame is busier at her looking-glass than Alice.

Lavender Gibson (as the Wicked Queen):

Mirror, Mirror on the wall

Let the wide world know,

The battle is won and the prize is mine,

I've earned the right to crow.

(Parades the stage in great triumph, ignoring the approaching throng of dwarfs, trees and others.)

Tom Colman (as the Mirror):

That I'm the Mirror on the wall,

Quite obviously I know.

The battle is won and the prize is gone

And you look like a crow.

(Parades the stage behind the Wicked Queen.)

Alas, Your Majesty, your evil and wicked ways have been found out. Snow White lives, rescued by the Handsome Prince. Even now they are on their way here, accompanied by, of all things, nineteen dwarfs and a forest. Beauty has triumphed over evil!

Lavender Gibson: Ah, woe is me,

No time to flee. I am beaten.

(Picks up a handy dagger from her dressing-table.)

Oh, dagger of mine of burnished steel,

To my heart I shall plunge you

And hope no pain to feel.

(Dies very dramatically, staggering all round the stage as Snow White, the Handsome Prince, the nineteen dwarfs and the trees enter. The Handsome Prince and Snow White bound on to the stage and hurdle the body of the Wicked Queen.)

Not an easy task at all, readers. Lavender Gibson makes quite a high hurdle for Maggie and Bog. Ms Hennessey is thinking of using the mini-tramp from the gym. This would help to give them a good lift as they attempt to jump her.

Maggie Smith (as Snow White):

You've heard the story of Snow White.

Bogdan Lupescu (as the Handsome Prince):

It has a moral, true.

Maggie Smith: That when, in time, you're getting old.

Bogdan Lupescu: And feeling rather blue. . .

(Wicked Queen rises groggily from the stage. Speaks slowly and with great drama.)

Don't . . . look . . . in . . . your . . . Mirror. . . !

(Very loud cheers from all the dwarfs and the trees and the rest of the cast who have come on with them. Curtain falls.)

'Tickets go on sale tomorrow, pets,' said Ms Hennessey. 'I expect

all of you to do your best to sell them. No use doing all this work unless we have a decent-sized audience each night. Apart from that, the school needs the money.'

'I'm going to set up a table, Ms Hennessey,' said Lav. 'Outside the Tavern by the Public Bar. That's where they always sell raffle tickets.'

'Not on your life, Lavender Gibson, or mine, either. You'll keep well clear of the Greenhill Tavern, all of you. D'you hear me? Do you understand?' Ms Hennessey seemed a bit agitated.

'Aw, Ms Hennessey. It's just the right place to flog them,' said Boggy. 'Don't know what they're buying, when they all come out of there. We'd sell thousands.'

'No, Bogdan. No. You do understand?' Ms Hennessey spoke slowly and deliberately.

'In that case,' sniffed Lav. 'I shall set up my table outside Poppy's shop. You can't stop me doing that.'

Ms Hennessey sighed. 'It seems to me, Lavender Gibson, that there's very little at all I can stop you doing. Now, all of you. Don't forget there's a last costume check on Saturday morning, and next week we use the real dwarf house for rehearsals. It's count-down time, everyone. And, do you know? I think we've got a show.'

'Well, if she's only just found that out,' whispered Lav.

Ms Hennessey beamed a big grin at us all. 'Break a leg, everyone. Break a leg!'

This may well appear a very strange thing to say, but it's not. Those of us in this romantic and strange acting business know that all it means is good luck. Just how breaking a leg can be equalled with good luck is well beyond me. Still, as Lavender often tells me, many, many things are well beyond me and will only get nearer as I get taller or bigger.

Break a leg!

I am not going to bore you, dear readers, with a too-long account

of the Mrs Poppy Gibson Welcome Home Eugene, Congratulations Carlos and Sprained Ankle Recovery barbecue held at our place on the coldest October night in the history of our fair suburb. But you can't escape the highlights unless you skip the next few pages, which would be a great pity. It didn't rain. This is unusual for a Greenhill Saturday night. I did, however, think that at one stage it was snowing. If it wasn't snow then it was ash from the barbecue which, because the evening was so cold, got turned into a bonfire.

It became an even bigger bonfire later in the evening, by which time all the older guests had gone inside and were warming themselves up with something a bit stronger than my Dad's fruit punch, and having a little rest before rushing outside to fight the fire caused by Carlos Gibson. They could have saved themselves the trouble, because the Greenhill Volunteer Fire Brigade turned up anyway and they are professionals at the job.

'Got anything to make this fire blast off, kid?' Carlos asked me. 'Cold enough out here to freeze the tits off a tiger.'

Carlos Gibson has a very coarse and rude turn of phrase, which would shock the education and teaching people if only they knew. Still, what's the use of telling them? I've done my best and no one'll believe me. I still can't believe in my heart of hearts that they'd let this thing loose in front of thirty or forty trusting little six-year-old kids with upturned, open faces, bright eyes and bushy tails. 'Cold enough to freeze the tits off a tiger this morning, eh kids? Get your maths books out.' Is this the best that our great society can do? Is it?

I offered him the fifty-three shrubs and trees from our garden but he said they'd be too green. A great pity, in more ways than one. I could have got rid of the dreadful and untidy things and stuck old Carlos in it good and proper, all in one blow.

He settled for three old bicycle tyres and one not-so-old car tyre. I gave him a box of old magazines, plus the half-full lawn mower petrol can. I made very sure I gave the whole lot to Carlos

personally. 'There's plenty more where they all came from, Carlos,' I told him. 'Throw 'em on, man.' All his mates yelled out, too.

'Throw 'em on, Carly. Toss 'em on!' There were a lot of them there, and some were even worse than Carlos, and they all had girls with them who looked nearly as bad as Sue.

'Dad! Mum . . . Mum! Dad! Come quick! Carlos has set fire to our garden and your lovely trees. You gotta come quick. It's all going up! Quick!'

They came very quick. After all, the light from the fire was now brightening up the inside of our house, even through the curtains.

Unfortunately, by the time the Greenhill Volunteer Fire Brigade got there, the bonfire had been hosed under control. All Carlos got was a lecture from the fire chief, and he really didn't get that to himself. All of us took our share.

Guess who got left to clean up the mess? Need I say? Carlos and his mates and all their girls, if you can call them that, took off, probably to set fire to someone else's party. The old guests all went back inside to have a rest and a dance, and Lav, me, Boggy, Griller and Maggie were left to sweep up, tidy up, mop up and set things straight. Well, who ever said life was meant to be fair? I certainly didn't. Quite frankly it's just about time that the people who draw up the laws about child labour took a close look at the monster they have created.

'Come on, you all. I'll give you a helping hand.' Surprise, surprise. It was Eugene, back amongst us after his refreshing vacation in his home town of Pocatello, Idaho, U.S. of A.

A real surprise. It is a great pity he cannot enter my story more often but, truly, all I can ever do with Eugene is describe him because, poor guy, he doesn't talk. Some of us are talkers and some of us are doers. Eugene is a doer, and he sure does everyone and everything in sight when he's on the basketball court. I shall repeat what he just said. It's just about the total sum of what he said that night, and it's a pity to let it get lost on the wind. 'Come on, you all. I'll give you a helping hand,' said Eugene.

'How was your Mum, Eugene?' I thought I'd try a chat. Everyone can talk about their mother.

'Un, uh,' said Eugene.

'I bet she's real proud of you being the big time basketball player and star.'

'Un, uh,' said Eugene.

'Does she live right in the heart of Pocatello, Idaho, or out in the far-flung suburbs like we do?'

'Un, uh,' said Eugene.'

Nothing could illustrate more clearly than this conversation the great difficulty Eugene has with communication. This must be why he is such a star sportsperson. Quite clearly, when he is on the court he is able to use body language rather than the mouth language at which he is so inefficient. I have often wondered if one of his main problems is the fact that his ears are just so far above the mouths of your smaller type person like myself, that he just cannot hear what is said to him. I don't think so. He's just the same when he's sitting down.

'You might have hurt his feelings,' said Lav later, when Eugene had gone back inside and there was just her and me and the other three. 'Eugene hasn't had a mother since he was a baby. His grandma brought him up. Grandma Vincenzo. She's an Italian from Idaho.'

'A black one?'

'No. An Italian one,' said Lav. 'The U.S. of A. is one big melting-pot.'

What a pot! And now my friend, Lavender Gibson, was about to add her ingredients to it. Lavender Gibson, daughter of an English gentleman (and Mrs Poppy Gibson, of course), sister of a Portuguese, soon to be step-daughter of a North American Black and soon to be step-great grand-daughter of a very elderly Italian. A true melting pot. It made my own boring family look outright sick, even if my sister, Sue, just might end up as a step-great grand-daughter-in-law of the same elderly Italian. But what a price she'd

have to pay on the way!

'I think my grandma was an Eskimo,' said Griller. Interesting. Should I allow myself to get sidetracked or should I store it up for later? Later it must be, because now was a golden time to uncover just a bit more about Boggy Lupescu and his family history. 'What about your grandma and grandad, Bog? Bet they weren't Eskimoes, eh?'

'Nah,' said Bog. 'My grandad was a wild dingo catcher in the outback, and my grandma used to get chased by emus when she was barefoot on her way to school. She used to have to find a handy gum tree to hide behind.'

'I never knew they had dingoes and emus and an outback in Rumania, Bog.' This was real cunning and very smart. Of course they don't. Do they?

'That was Mum's Mum and Dad, in Australia.'

'What about your Dad's Mum and Dad, Bog?'

'Grandfather Lupescu works for the gasworks and energy department in a town on the Black Sea. We went there last August. I sent you a postcard from there. Grandma was an ice-skater. She was once a world famous ice-skater. Even in the Olympics.'

Clearly this was where Bog had got his great music ability from. 'What about their Mums and Dads? What about them?'

'I don't know. Why do you want to know, Tom?'

Getting close to it now. Right down to the bone. Or the blood! Work in a gasworks? I bet! There is clearly no limit to the cunning of the descendants of the great and bloody Count Dracula of Central Rumania. Gasworks, indeed.

'My Grandmother Hylton-Styles was a duchess,' said Lavender, and I lost any further chance with Bog.

'You mean like a dressing-table?' asked Boggy.

'No, dummo. Like a Princess.'

'She was not, Lav,' I said.

'She was so.'

'She was not. My Mum told me.'

'What does your Mum know about it?'

'She knows your Grandma wasn't a duchess.'

'She wouldn't know, would she? She's just jealous. Anyway, my Grandmother Hylton-Styles died before I was born.'

'Just as well, Lav,' said Bog. 'One look at you would've been enough to croak her.'

'Poppy says I take after her,' said Lavender.

'Then she sure was no duchess,' said Bog. 'Not even a dressing-table, either.'

'Old Mrs Mumford's got great grandchildren,' said Griller. 'Only she doesn't see 'em.'

'Why not?' asked Maggie.

'They live right up north and the train costs too much for them, and with 'er old bones not right, she don't go to see 'em, either. She reckons they've forgot all about 'er. Don't reckon so. She's got this suitcase full of all their Christmas cards.'

'It's sad being old, eh?' said Lav. 'Real sad. One day you're a wild dingo catcher or a duchess, and next day you're dead.'

'Not if you get the dingo first, eh Lav?' said Bog.

'I'd like a dingo,' said Grill. 'I'd really like a dingo. This guy at the gang house got a dingo. Reckons it's a German Shepherd but I reckon it's a dingo awright. I'd like a dingo.'

'I think a dingo'd like you, Grill,' said Lav. 'You'd make at least a week of dingo dinners.' And they had a little fight just to finish off the party.

CHAPTER TWELVE

In which dress rehearsal is one big disaster

Disaster! Absolute and utter disaster!

We are going to be one big, fat flop. Ms Hennessey said so, and she should know. Thank God it's her play and not mine! She's done her best has poor, dear Ms Hennessey, or so she says. Somehow her best hasn't been quite good enough. Neither has ours, she says. She blames us. We blame her. To my mind it is unfortunate that Ms Hennessey has not been equal to the task.

Sadly, our dress rehearsal has told us that we are destined to flop in front of a very large audience, the cream of Greenhill society. Everyone, just everyone is coming. It's a sell-out. Our play, disaster that it is, is clearly the cultural event of the year for our suburb, and most certainly an event to be seen at. Oh, dear friends, what a calamity, what a catastrophe they are going to see! That chronicle of disasters, the *Greenhill Gazette*, is sure going to have something for its next front page.

Let me explain.

First off, Ms Hennessey has lost her voice. Well, I'm not surprised, the way she's been yelling at us for weeks. She now tells us things by writing them up on a blackboard set up in the middle of the hall. I cannot begin to tell you some of the words she's written. Thank God, I say, that kindly old Mr Harvey can't read a word without his glasses. Unprintable.

Lavender Gibson is the biggest flop of all. If Lavender is anything at all, she's big. For this reason it would have been much, much better to have had a smaller Wicked Queen, and then we'd have had a smaller flop. She forgot at least half her lines and couldn't hear the prompt. If I was Lavender Gibson and I knew that Cloris Brown was the prompt, I'd have sure learnt all my lines. Cloris prompts very, very quietly and, for Lavender, quite often from

the wrong part of the script. 'How can I help it, Ms Hennessey? She's all over the place and I don't know where to prompt her. I'm doing my best. She's no good, Ms Hennessey.'

'Shut up, Cloris,' Ms Hennessey wrote on the blackboard.

Cloris's prompting is not helped much by Lav wearing an enormous blue and orange wig of Mrs Poppy Gibson's. The wig covers Lav's ears and slips down over her face and covers most of that, too. Lavender Gibson's dress split, too, right from under her arm and then kept on splitting.

'You'll have to lose some weight, Lavender Gibson,' Cloris said, nice and loud so Lav could hear. 'Like half a tonne by tomorrow night.'

Lavender didn't like that and she said so. As she kicked Cloris Brown, her dress split some more.

'Get out, L. Gibson,' Ms Hennessey wrote on the blackboard, and then, 'Come back — it's too late to change.'

Maggie Smith got stuck in the branches of two trees and now there's bits of tree stuck all over the net stuff that makes up her dress, and there's bits of net and sequins stuck over two trees. Not only are the trees painted all these great, fantastic colours but now they glitter, too. Maggie Smith's hair also got stuck in a tree, and that took ten minutes to get undone. When Maggie gets stuck in anything her voice gets pretty loud and she remembers to say the 'r' in all her words. It's quite amazing what getting stuck can do to a person.

The roll-on roll-off dwarf house rolled all right. Right off the other side of the stage! It pinned Lavender Gibson to the wall and she swore very loudly.

Griller Spinks's tattoo covers his whole chest. It's sure one big tattoo and he's cut away the front of the leather bikie jacket so that it can be seen better. Unable to get into town to the real tattoo place, he's done the whole thing in that very black Indian ink and it won't wash off. The tattoo is of one big, enormous banana just starting to get peeled. He's written 'Eat me' in giant letters

underneath it. Griller's quite good at art and I think it looks superb, especially when he flexes his very many muscles in a certain way.

Ms Hennessey wrote 'Disgusting' on the blackboard and, 'Wear an old T-shirt over it.'

Griller, somewhat hurt at this, said, 'Piss Off,' and it took Maggie and Squeaky nearly half an hour to get him to come back. Squeaky is, indeed, the one success story. It is true that his leather jacket is so big that he trips over it all the time. But his hair is truly, truly choice. He's shaved some parts right down to the scalp and he's dyed all the rest blue, green and ginger, and it's beautifully spiked. And he looks so sweet with his six bicycle chains hung round his neck and his plastic sub-machine gun slung over his shoulder. An evil little bundle indeed.

Bogdan Lupescu? We will never know what a disaster he would've been. He was saved because our dress rehearsal never made it that far. Bog's dress rehearsal will be our opening night.

We didn't get that far because of the dwarfs. I would dearly like to say they are all as cute as Squeaky Simpson, as they toddle merrily onto the stage on their knees with their little arms going flat out like pistons. But they are not cute, and it is here that poor Ms Hennessey has made a disastrous mistake. She let them do their own costumes. 'Be original, pets. Be creative and just see what you can come up with.' They took her at her word, which was reasonable.

Come up with? Six of them have wigs that keep falling off as they toddle. Knee toddling is very physical and is sure hard on the knees. One dwarf toddled right off the front of the stage and had to be carted to the sick-room. Two of them wear old hobnail boots that they have cut down so they can jam them on their knees. This has slowed them somewhat, and there are now pile-ups of dwarfs behind them. About ten of them have painted their own T-shirts. If Ms Hennessey was upset by Grill's banana you can imagine how some of these T-shirts truly frizzled her amazing head of red hair. Another two of them have little walking sticks.

While they don't use them much for walking they certainly have found other good uses for them and many, many good poking places.

Then absolute disaster fell. The dwarfs who wrap up Maggie in the sheet of plastic did their job so well she half suffocated, and Grill had to give her mouth-to-mouth before he dealt with the wrappers. It was then that Ms Hennessey truly did write on the blackboard, 'Piss off, Griller Spinks,' and our dress rehearsal ended.

Break a leg!!!

Ms Hennessey called in the big guns and reinforcements, and we had a quite, quite different dress rehearsal the next morning. It never ceases to amaze me how, when disaster threatens the teaching profession, they all hang in there together.

Ms Hennessey had half her voice back and Mr Harvey sat beside her and bellowed orders as she whispered to him. A surprising gentleman. When the chips are down he can bellow like the rest of them, even louder. I suppose, after all, this is how he got where he is today.

Mrs Lupescu and her sewing machine were at the back of the hall and she stitched up Lavender, sewed a few extra nets on Maggie, and began stitching big bright flowers all over the fronts of dwarf T-shirts.

Griller Spinks' banana was now a heart. 'Eat me' did seem a bit cruel but no one seemed to mind. And, shudder, shudder, who should be backstage and standing right in the middle of the dwarfs, but Mr Alf Smith and that well-known teacher-to-be, Carlos Gibson. They had borrowed the cut-down walking sticks from the two dwarfs. Carlos Gibson with a stick in his hand would make a mad dog shiver, and the nineteen dwarfs were now very quiet indeed. I'm not surprised.

As will now be absolutely clear, creativity flew right out of the window and we had a quite boring if non-disastrous show that

went from a beginning to an end.

'Well, pets, it's over to you,' Ms Hennessey croaked. 'You've done the work splendidly and now, I hope, each of you will reap your rewards. Splendid effort.'

It looked like only about seventeen dwarfs were still going to be around to reap anything at all. Two of them were croaking even worse than Ms Hennessey. Carlos Gibson had the crook of his walking stick around the neck of Dwarf No. 11 and was slowly twisting it. Dwarf No. 3 had the foot and shoe of Alf Smith planted on his leg. Alf was pressing down, firmly. Kindly old Mr Harvey was looking the other way. I don't think he's the sort who likes seeing his pupils tortured.

'All that remains for me to say to you is. . . ' croaked Ms Hennessey, softly. But we never found out what remained for her to say. Mrs Lupescu started up her sewing machine on yet another large and colourful flower.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

In which dreams come true

Success! A glittering night of fairy-tale fantasy.

An enormous, brilliant success. What a night of drama and bliss!

It is indeed a pity that kindly old Mr Harvey had not agreed to my request to have the school floodlit, with spotlights and searchlights poking their rays into the heavens. It would have made a nice touch.

It would have been better, I feel, to have had the school band playing *outside* the hall as the audience came in. They are truly a very dreadful band, and if their music had been lost on the wind no one would've been any the wiser. Anything would have been better than cooping them up at the front of the hall for their quarter hour of concert. And the least said the better about our school choir who took the next quarter hour.

Mrs Poppy Gibson, Mrs Lupescu and Mum did our make-up. Grease-paint, as we in the profession call it. They performed a miracle on Boggy. Of course this was desperately needed. In the end he looked almost handsome. True miracle, indeed. They made the very big mistake of letting the dwarfs do their own grease-paint, and they ended up with seven ghosts and twelve Red Indians. A strange family of dwarfs. In another artistic triumph they managed to make Maggie Smith look almost pretty. Finally they got to work on Squeak, Grill and Lav. A superb effort with all three.

'Not gonna have that gunk on me face,' said Grill.

'Shut up kid,' said Mrs Poppy Gibson. 'Now what part are you playing, ducky? It can't be the Handsome Prince because I've done him.'

'I'm a guard,' said Grill. 'And I gotta look real evil.'

'Well, that won't take much,' said Mrs Poppy Gibson. She gave

him a big black moustache, greased his hair into spikes and plaited a couple of dreadlocks. Then she got to work on painting one superb scar that went right across his face, mouth and all. Mrs Poppy Gibson is surely an artist. Next she got to work on Squeaky. She didn't have to do his hair so she gave him a little, straggly beard, and then a scar to match Grill's. Wow! They sure looked evil.

The whole three of them worked on Lavender, and what wonders they created! Great big eyebrows like butterflies, and vicious red lips with a black dot like a fat full-stop at the edge of her mouth. In the end she looked more evil than Grill and Squeak.

They didn't bother too much with me. After all, what should a mirror look like? They thought they had problems just doing the make-up. Should try playing the part of a *mirror*! They didn't bother too much with Cloris Brown, either. After all, no one looks at her anyway, and I'm not surprised.

All this time poor Ms Hennessey, a physical and mental wreck, paced up and down croaking encouragement to us all. She even borrowed a cigarette from Carlos Gibson. This was a bit strange, because she doesn't smoke. It can't have done anything for her throat. 'It's going to be all right, pets,' she croaked. 'I hope. Oh, dear God, what on earth made me let myself in for all this stress and hassle?' Groan, groan, cough, cough, croak. 'Never again, Alfie,' to her husband who was guarding the dwarfs. 'Never again, I promise. But I know it's going to be all right.'

The dwarfs were divided up into separate rooms for Alf Smith and Carlos to guard. From time to time you could hear roars and squeals, and I knew in my old bones that Carlos was having a lot of fun.

Dear old Miss Webseter, class teacher to myself, Lav, Maggie and Boggy, guarded us, the stars. She is a dear soul and it has been her lot in her teaching life to get this sort of job. Not for the Miss Websters of the teaching world the bright lights, the grease-paint and the roar of the crowd! She is your very dependable, very

boring, nice back-room girl. Backroom woman, really. She's going to retire next year.

Our moment of truth crept up and arrived. It always does in the end. 'The audience is restless,' Ms Hennessey hissed and croaked. 'Ssshhh. . . .'

Not at all surprising that they were restless. A half an hour of our school band and choir would be enough to make a holy saint restless.

They ate from the palms of our hands from the moment Lavender Gibson swept onto the stage, knocked the pink dressing-table flying, clipped me around the ears with her fan and sent me flying after the dressing-table.

They were rolling in the aisles, or it looked like it as I picked myself up and peered through my picture frame across the bank of footlights.

They loved Griller and Squeaky. 'Where's yer banana, Grill?' I heard one loud voice. I think it came from a group of his mates from the gang house. And there, right in the middle of the front row and next to Mrs Spinks, was old Mrs Mumford. I could tell it was her by her laugh and I could see the light spilling off the stage and reflecting on her glasses. She called out 'Give it to 'er, Ernie. You give it to 'er, lad,' whenever Grill was on the stage.

They sure went for the dwarfs, did that audience. Hoots, yowls and cheers when they toddled on and off, all in order and all nicely spaced. This was hardly surprising. They were not allowed to start toddling until Carlos Gibson poked each one in the back and set them going.

Dear Ms Hennessey! She stood backstage with tears streaming down her lovely face. In all truth she didn't look too lovely. Her bad throat, the strain and the cigarette had all clearly taken their toll. 'Ah, pets,' she whispered, hoarsely. 'This is what it's all about. You've done me proud.'

They sure loved Lavender in her Auntie Minny bit. All the little

kids in the audience yelled at Maggie as Snow White, 'It's her . . . it's her!' and 'Don't eat that apple. Don't eat it!' And 'OOoooh. . . ' as she ate it and sank into her deep and death-like coma.

What a laugh old Bog got as the Handsome Prince! Well, he really was a laugh whatever way you look at it, and in spite of the large quantities of grease-paint on his face. Still, by the time he got on the stage the audience seemed just about ready to accept anything, and it did help that he got hidden by the dwarfs for much of the time. They killed themselves when he kissed Snow White. The thought of a kiss from Bog being able to wake up anything from the dead clearly got them going strong. Naturally none of them shared my very real worries on this matter, and I hoped poor Maggie had remembered my advice about the garlic. Better safe than sorry, I always say, although Maggie had said, 'I wealy can't see, Tom, why me smelling like his mother's lasagne should help Boggy come to better gwips with his part, and it wouldn't add to the dwama at all.'

Flashlights popped all over the place. Clearly it would be front-page time yet again in the *Greenhill Gazette*. The price of fame.

The real highlights, as we actors know, often come from the unexpected moments of drama in a production. Our soft and lovely Snow White, Maggie Smith, gave us ours. Exhausted from all her hard work, she just didn't quite make it in her leap over Lavender. Maggie Smith is, quite simply, not a natural high jumper. Crash! Flat on her face and half knocked out. Believe it or not, Boggy had the sense to give her a quick kiss just as if he was waking her up from yet another deep and death-like coma, which, in a way, he was. Bog's kiss sure worked and she sprang to her feet in double quick time. The audience howled with laughter.

The whole show seemed to fly by in just seconds, rather than the 47.5 minutes Ms Hennessey reckoned it should take if we did it properly. Then it was all applause and bows and applause and bows and our opening night was over.

Ah, this acting bug. It is surely running through my bloodstream.

It's wonderful how quickly amateurs turn into real professionals, or troupers, as we of the profession call ourselves. 'Well, Tom, darling,' said Lavender. She now calls everyone 'darling'. Actors do this and, as far as Lavender Gibson is concerned, it doesn't mean anything more than 'dummo'. 'I have a feeling that a star is born,' she said.

I have a feeling she meant herself and not me. 'If you say so, Lav.' 'The *Greenhill Gazette* said so in their review.'

'You can't believe everything you read, Lav. You've told me that a thousand times. And you sure can't believe everything you read in the *Greenhill Gazette*. I doubt you can believe *anything* you read in the *Greenhill Gazette*.

'Some things I'm quite happy to believe,' said Lav. 'I've had a chat to Poppy. I've told her I want to go to Hollywood, L.A., to further my career. I know I can do it, and the openings there are enormous.'

Just as well, I thought but did not say. 'Why Hollywood, Lav?' I asked.

'It's just about the centre of the entertainment universe, that's why. I reckon I can crack it, and if Poppy and Eugene ever get it together it'll be a lot easier to do it from Pocatello, Idaho than from Greenhill.'

'D'you think you're ready for it, Lav? After all, you've only been in one school play, and we've only done one night of that. You might flop tonight or tomorrow night.'

Lavender snorted, 'I hardly think that's likely. I carry that show. You know, I think it's just so wrong that Ms Hennessey is getting all the credit. She might've written it, though I doubt it. I think she flogged it from someone and she's passing it off as her own. But she's sure got me to thank for making her name.'

'I think she's got us all to thank,' I said.

'You?' Lavender snorted even louder. 'You?'

'I didn't mean just me, Lav. I meant the whole team.'

'The whole team? Don't make me laugh,' and Lavender Gibson

laughed, real loud. 'Look at them. You can't count Cloris Brown, and I've never counted her, anyway, for anything, and she sure can't prompt. Look at Maggie. She's just herself, really. All dressed up, but just Maggie Smith under the dress. I don't think she even looks pretty. Same for Griller.'

'Well Griller's not pretty, Lav.'

'You know what I mean, Tom-tit, darling. And Boggy Lupescu, I ask you.' She waved her hands in her new actor's way. 'He's nearly as bad as you. As I said to Ms Hennessey, "Why on earth did you cast him as the Handsome Prince, Sharlene, darling? He'd have been better off and happier as a dwarf." And she agreed with me.'

'Oh, yeah?' I bet she hadn't said 'Sharlene', either.

'Credit where credit is due, Tommy. It's me who carries the can in that show. I sure reckon Hollywood is on the cards. Hollywood or bust. I've heard that line somewhere.'

Maggie and Griller and Boggy and Squeak joined us. 'Old Mrs Mumford's coming again,' said Grill. 'She said I was "bees knees", whatever that is.'

'You did wonderfully, darling. Su . . . uper,' said Lavender Gibson, the star.

'Wha?' said Griller.

'Darlings, you all did absolutely your tip-top best,' she said.

'What's crept into her? Boggy asked me, quietly.

'Success,' I said.

Night two was a sell-out, and the noise was even louder. It was night three that topped them all. Word had spread on the grapevine of our suburb and we packed them in like sardines. You could even hear them cheering the band and the choir, which shows they must have been looking forward to the real business of the night in eager anticipation. And did we give it to them? From the first moment to the last! — and there were some lines in it that dear Ms Hennessey had never dreamed of.

Seven curtain calls.

There could have been, should have been, many more, but as Lavender Gibson stepped forward in a deep and dramatic curtsey, she caught her toe in the hem of her dress and hurtled – no other word for it – right over the edge of the stage. Lavender Gibson *did* break a leg.

As I said to her next day in the hospital, 'I reckon you won't be carrying any can for a while now, Lav.'

'No,' she said.

'Hollywood or bust, Lav? Well, you've got one out of the two, Lav. That's not bad.'

'Shut up,' she said.

'Is it itchy under all that plaster, Lav? If it's not itchy now, it soon will be. It'll torture you. It'll itch so bad it'll likely drive you out of your mind, and there's nothing you or anyone can do about it.'

And Griller Spinks said, 'Got any chocolate or stuff, Lav?'

'Only what you brought, dummo, and you've already eaten that,' said Lav.

And Maggie Smith said, 'That lady from the *Gweenhill Gazette* said she got a lovely photo of you just as you were falling off the stage and your gown is all up and your knickers are showing and all. It'll be on the fwont page of the next paper.'

'And Cloris Brown said, 'It's lovely to see you here, Lavender, and I'm going to come and see you here every day. What else are friends for?'

And Boggy Lupescu said, 'Ms Hennessey said trust you, Lavender Gibson, to get the last laugh and to finish it all off, before we got to give her the flowers you'd been trying to hide all night.'

And Squeaky Simpson said, 'Mr Harvey reckons he should give you his community service award, and I don't know why *you* should get it, Lavender Gibson, not after all the digging *I* done.'

And several dwarfs said, 'Giddyay, Lav,' and left fairly quick after they found nothing left to eat and they had signed Lav's leg, on which Grill had already done three banana designs.

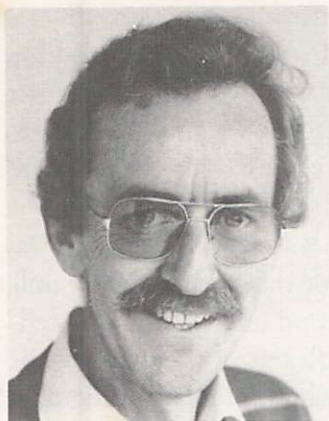
And Lavender Gibson said, 'Well, darlings, what's next?'

'And the charge nurse came in and said, 'Come on, you lot. Scram! Out! The lot of you. What on earth d'you think this place is — a zoo? I've got sick people in here, and it's two visitors to a bed.' Then she smiled. 'Haven't I seen you lot somewhere before?'

'Quite likely on the stage, darling,' said Lavender.

'Don't you "darling" me, miss, and it wasn't on the stage. It was one Friday night, not so long ago outside the Tavern in Greenhill, and you half-wrecked our demonstration and got me arrested.'

And so, dear readers, we met up with one of the sisters again, and had a chat over old times, a chat about drama and the stage and what the future might hold for us all.



William Taylor, winner of the Choysa Bursary for Children's Writers in 1985, has produced five books in less than two years and is rapidly becoming one of New Zealand's most popular writers for children. Born in Lower Hutt, he is the father of two sons and Mayor of Ohakune, on the south-western slopes of Mt Ruapehu. His interests include gardening, reading, music and a variety of outdoor activities.